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Author: Ilya Iliev

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The Reconstruction of Căluș in a Bulgarian Village

Ilya Iliev

The performance of the local group for authentic folklore is one of the top features of the festival in the village of Bliznatsi¹, celebrated yearly in the beginning of summer. For more than three decades, with only insignificant breaks, this group has presented the ritual „Calush“ near the village, in the same place where the petty traders arrange their tables and install merry-go-rounds and refreshment boots. The time of the Calush comes in the evening, around 7pm, in the very centre of the most vigorous „public“ part of the feast, after the visitors coming from the town have already consumed a cup of coffee or rakia with their hosts, relatives, former classmates or friends, in the village, but before the festive family dinner.

The Performance

Unlike in previous years, the 1996 performance was not preceded by a mayor's speech and by a short commemoration of the village soldiers, fallen during the Balkan wars and the two World Wars. The protagonists were several boys aged 12-15, one girl at the age of around 14, and a middle-aged man playing a violin. The boys and the man were dressed in knee-length white cotton shirts, decorated with red ornaments around the neck and the lower rim. They wore

tight white *benevretsi* (socks) and a red belt garished with black stripes here and there.

All of them wore the standard Călușari decoration, a bunch of herbs, fresh onions and garlic, trussed up in their belts and caps; they carried also one-meter-long sticks. Tied to their ankles were either spurs or small bells. The girl's costume was more modest, consisting of a skirt and shirt of faded black and dark-blue colours. All of the protagonists had taken off their watches.

Two boys placed a small wooden table on the stage, where until a minute previously the local orchestra had been playing. Other boys brought in a clay pot and rolled out a dark worn-out carpet on the floor. The participants formed a straight line on the scene, the girl laid down on the carpet while the violinist began playing.

Two-thirds of the people attending the feast gathered around the violinist, yet the music coming from the nearby merry-go-rounds, kiosks and boots did not allow the violin to be heard at all. Following a murmur of dissatisfaction most of the loudspeakers (but not all of them) were switched off. Even so, people standing in the rear could not hear anything; and, therefore, one of the boys of the local orchestra brought the microphone to the stage. He tried to fix it there but

the violinist explained to him that the participants in the ritual would be moving constantly back and forth, so the volunteer decided to follow the musician closely, carrying the microphone with him. In the end the violinist resumed playing and the boys started moving slowly. Initially, the dance was rather slow. The players made two circles around the table, going counter-clockwise, shouting from time to time „Ala calus“, „Khop sha“, „Ah now“, „Let's do it“. The music was gradually becoming more vivid and the movements faster and more energetic. The boys began making errors with the steps, one of them had its shoe unlaced, and the whole dancing line fell apart.

The audience reacted with cheerfulness and benevolent laughter. One elderly lady sprang up on the stage and, taking two of the boys by hand, showed them the steps and helped them restore the rhythm. Then the Călușari continued dancing around the prone girl, this time at a considerably slower and more careful pace. After the second tour around the table, one of the braver boys grasped the pot, drank from it, and, amidst loud acclaim, spat the water on two fellow – Călușari. After a second of hesitation, one of them fell on the floor while the girl who had been lying down jumped up and hurried out of the circle. This was the end².

It was obvious that the people recognised the conclusion, because they started clapping and prepared to leave amidst laughter and lively conversations. This was one of those rituals, like football or politics, where the audience seems to know the rules better than the actual performers. The boys from the group, together with some friends, also headed towards the village in order to change their clothes. After an hour, one could see them dressed like all other youngsters around the village, taking part in the various entertainments of the feast.

During the performance, a group of men in their late 50s - early 60s was standing somewhat apart. They observed carefully each step of the dancers, nodded approvingly from time to time, and then joined enthusiastically in the loud applause at the performance's end. Yet before and after the feast, they ardently discussed the group for authentic folklore; according to them its members deviated strongly from the local traditions. These were the „old calusari“, who had been dancing during previous feasts. They were my privileged informants, because I, like any other respectful ethnographer, had been delighted to get in touch with a more authentic tradition and to understand how the performance I described above differed from its ancient, authentic form.

The cultural house, the old books and the national tradition

I was not the only one looking for the authentic tradition. The villagers of Bliznatsi were unanimous that the person who knew best and who had sought the truth on the calus most fervently is Valentin. Valentin was the former director of the secondary school in the neighbouring village, and a prominent activist of the local cultural house. Villagers told mythical stories about his decades-long investigations. „He has lots of books“; „he has read everything on the calus“; „he explains everything both to the old calusari and to the boys“; „he goes regularly to Sofia – he has a brother there – and buys books...“; „your colleagues from the institute come to talk to him“.

The boys from the group acknowledged all this. Valentin was the person who had explained to them what to do and why, alongside their grandparents. He had watched their first rehearsals too. It had to be admitted that there were other people around, such as the woman from the cultural house, the young Roma violinist, the old Călușari who watched the

performance and helped dancers learn the steps, but the most important of all was Valentin.

He had dedicated more than twenty years to studying the Căluș and was eager, even impatient, to discuss the problems surrounding the ritual's restoration which tormented him or about whose solving he was proud. According to Valentin, no full and correct restoration of the calus was possible, as was also the case with tradition and the past. *„I know you think that the performance is not as it was before. That is right. But where can I find how it was before? No one remembers.“*

Valentin began restoring the ritual in 1964. At that time, a decree of the trade unions' central office was issued, which ordered the restoration of traditional rituals, specific for each region. As a young and ambitious clerk in the cultural house, Valentin saw right away the possibility of organising an event including the local cooperative farm, which until then had not caught the attention of the local activists. Under his guidance, a commission of „active“ villagers gathered, among them the director of the cooperative farm, the deputy-mayor of the village, two teachers and the accountant of the Bulgarian Communist Party's local branch. These were relatively important people in the village of Bliznatsi but not the most important ones. After all, it was only a cultural event that was at stake.

After long discussions, the group's members decided that the most representative and the most specific ritual for the village was the „căluș“. Then they prepared a list of 15 teenagers – potential călușari – and sent the guard of the cooperative farm to assemble them.

The commission's representatives also summoned the elderly Marcho, former active participant in the September 1923 Communist rebellion, a cornerstone of the local branch of the Party and a former călușar, who was supposed to remember best the ritual.

The căluș had disappeared from the village long ago. Up until the end of the 1930s, some of the villagers used to go to the neighbouring town and perform the căluș for money. Yet in the village of Bliznatsi itself there have been no călușari since the middle of the 1920s. The elderly Marcho, however, stated that he remembered almost nothing. He insisted that the commission should invite the other living călușar, the elderly Parvan. A former violinist of the călușari group, the elderly Parvan the Kalia, as he was called, was a bachelor, an alcoholic, and on top of it all, „belonging to the minority“. The two elderly people - the Communist hero and the artist - together with the commission's members selected the future calusari from among the 15 candidates. Each of the jury commented on the criteria within their own competence, such as moral qualities, professional development, political activity and the sense of rhythm. The elderly Marcho remained silent.

Valentin's real work began afterwards. The ritual had to be restored, yet the two elderly people were not much help. They said, for example, that when the violinist started playing, they began turning around. Valentin asked them how many tours they used to make around the sick person lying on the floor, but they could not remember clearly, the first saying something and the other refuting what had been said. It was the same with the dance's steps: „the first said leftward, the second rightward“.

That is why Valentin began looking for the truth in books. This was by no means an easy enterprise. Mikhail Arnaudov (Arnaudov 1920) had written extensively on the căluș, but the study was about căluș „in the whole of Bulgaria and even throughout the world“; a study in the best 19 century comparativist tradition. Arnaudov's research did not show which feature of the căluș was characteristic of the village of Bliznatsi, and which applied to other parts of Bulgaria, or even Romania, let alone that the

căluș differed in the various areas where it was performed.

Dimitar Marinov (Marinov 1914) was more useful but what he wrote diverged occasionally from the stories of the local călușari in Bliznatsi. For instance, although Marinov claimed that călușari had been accompanied by a pipe player, none of the villagers ever remembered such a thing. The villagers insisted the musician had to be a violinist. What to choose? Dimitar Marinov did not explain how long the staff of the banner should be either, or how long the sticks had to be.... Dimitar Marinov wrote also that at some point the călușari started making circles around the sick, but nothing else. How many circles, in what direction?

However, Valentin found „a Russian book“ which explained that three and seven were „sacred numbers“ in all Slavic cultures, so he concluded that the calusari needed to tour the sick either three or seven times. But when they made seven circles, the performance became too long. One had to think also about the festivals for authentic folklore where each group was allotted no more than 20-25 minutes. That is why Valentin decided that the calusari would tour the sick three times.

When reconstructing the căluș, Valentin found the most precious clues in the book of Dimitar Marinov, written at the end of the nineteenth century. As a rule, he followed Marinov closely during the reconstruction process. Valentin very rarely allowed a deviation from the written text, and only when all villagers were unanimous that the local version of the ritual differed from the descriptions in the old book (as was, for example, the case with the musician-violinist. Otherwise, the book taught him how the calusari had to be arranged on the scene, what the ritual decoration consisted of, and in what sequence the ritual acts had to be performed. In Mikhail Arnaudov's book, Valentin

found an explanation about the „meaning“ of the ritual, namely the shamanistic trance and the chasing out of the illness. In Ivan Venedikov's study, he discovered evidence that the căluș was a Bulgarian and not a Romanian ritual. As regards the costumes, they were bought from a special shop.³

According to Valentin, the whole process of restoring the căluș was based on a strictly scientific approach, which was the only way of achieving a relatively trustworthy reconstruction of the ritual. Valentin had reflected upon this problem and used to convey his thoughts by telling one and the same story. In the 1950s, when he was a teacher in Dobrudzha region, he found a ritual – „brezaia“ – which he had not heard of previously. Valentin described it diligently and even hoped to publish an article, but after some time he came across a „real article“ of a professional scholar who had succeeded in describing the brezaia „much better and in much more detail“. The scholar did the job better because he had read a host of old books and had relied on old descriptions. At that moment, Valentin realised that professional scholars have access to a tradition which is more authentic since it was fixed earlier (and was, therefore, older), and had been better preserved in the books.

What mattered were neither the personal skills of the researcher nor the fact that his text had gained authority after being published in a scholarly journal. What did matter was the scholar's access to a tradition fixed earlier, hence reflecting better the past and, as a consequence, more authentic. To rely on local people's memory was, in Valentin's words, a rather risky undertaking. Valentin often used one and the same carefully deliberated metaphor. *„It is the same as to take a piece of cloth which had stayed in the garden's corner for ages, left to the rain and wind. Its colour had faded away, the tissue had been worn out and shredded. And you want me*

to tell you what its original colour was, and even what kind of a dress it was taken from."

Valentin was seeking my advice precisely for questions whose answers he could not locate in the scholarly literature, i.e. where to put the sick (at how many steps from the table, in what direction – eastward, westward, southward, northward), how big the bunches of herbs and garlic should be, etc. Despite his long work of reconstruction of the ritual, he was convinced that somewhere and somehow he had broken the true tradition. That is why he did not insist too much on keeping those elements of the ritual he had reconstructed thanks to his own efforts and research. For example, Valentin was persuaded that the old călușari had most probably worn woollen clothes, yet allowed the boys to dress in light, white cotton clothes, which better suited the summer heat. He did not feel comfortable in imposing his vision because he was somewhat uncertain about how exactly the old calusari were dressed, despite the fact that all the preserved traditional costumes in the village were woollen. He did not even have a means to check that: no old book suggested a solution to this problem. The old books said only that the calusari wore white clothes; but whether they were from wool or from cotton no one could tell beyond any doubt. Valentin was thus an example of methodological modesty, a person clearly understanding and accepting the limits of the paradigm which he had chosen to follow.

Valentin had a logical theory on tradition which was shared by many other villagers too. The tradition, which was closer to the past and was better preserved, was also more authentic. That is why Valentin hoped to find it in records from the nineteenth century, when the căluș was registered for the first time. He preferred those records to the memories of the local călușari which supposedly stretched back to the First World War but did not precede it.

Valentin's reconstruction of the ritual placed the main accent on elements which were visible, hence could be presented in front of a public. The series of ritual activities, which are usually performed far from any audience (oaths, spells, mixing of magic herbs, ritual prohibitions, etc.), were not included in the performance. Problems appearing during the reconstruction were linked above all to those elements which could be seen by the public, namely the figures of the dance, the location of the decorations, etc. Even when Valentin was most prepared to share his doubts on the căluș's authenticity, he did not mention details that cannot be seen, such as the herbs, which, according to Dimitar Marinov, had to be stored in a special secret hole within the călușari's stick. The hidden side of the căluș did not interest Valentin very much. He was not interested either in the hidden elements connected to a mythology which had already disappeared. On the other hand, Valentin had a more than clear vision about the mythology sustaining the căluș's existence in its current form. „*Each country has its own traditions*“; „*traditions make us Bulgarian, that is why we must preserve them*“; „*the calus is one of the oldest and most beautiful Bulgarian traditions, yet it is kept only in our region*“. Valentin unmistakably connected the căluș with the identity of the Bulgarian nation. The ritual symbolised the linkage of Valentin's village to the Bulgarian national tradition which was supposed to shape Bulgaria.

In this context, one begins to understand Valentin's fear caused by the assertions of „certain people“ from his and other villages that the căluș was not a Bulgarian but a Romanian ritual. In 1978, these rumours reached the people working in the cultural section of the district committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in the town of Mikhailovgrad, and they ordered that the căluș be removed from the programme of the group for authentic folklore of the village of Bliznatsi. Due to the active efforts of Valentin and the positive opinion of the specialists of the

newly-established Institute of Folklore in Sofia, the ban was lifted shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, hesitations remained.

Valentin's colleagues from the local cultural house were also proud that their village has hosted such a unique ritual, which could be seen nowhere else, which attracted the attention of specialists from Mikhailovgrad⁴ and Sofia, and which had gained an award from the festival in Belogradchik. All of them acknowledged that the ritual's reconstruction was due to Valentin's efforts, that „he managed to apply tradition as it was before“, and that „he knows how to talk to the jury“. Yet they did not forget to mention their own humble contribution.

„It was easier before (meaning before 1989 – I. I.). The state allocated more funds to amateur artistic activities. Now we do not know what to do. For this year (1996 – I. I.), our cultural house received only 8000 leva for the whole year. With this money I must pay for subscriptions, new books for the library, electricity and the folklore group. People are tired and have no desire to dance. They say „we want to cry and you want us to dance“. I do not know what to tell them, here almost all of the people are unemployed. I cannot pay the men even hundred leva each. Moreover, they do not want to play. Today there are no big festivals as before, and they cannot travel.“

„We cannot force them. How can we force them? Before I could always go and talk to the party secretary, to the mayor, to the boss of the local factory.... They would summon the person and talk to him.... Of course, there was always someone who was neither fish nor fowl. One such person refused to dance in the last moment because he did not receive meat for the feast. But such individuals are an exception, one or two, not more. What about the boys? One could talk to their parents or to the school director, and they would call the boy, talk to him....“

„I had big problems with the elderly Parvan, God bless him. He was our violinist, a Gypsy. He died last year. He burned off, he had fallen asleep with a cigarette, dropped the cigarette down, and caught fire.... He was not an easy person. Once he told me he would not play. Why? Because, he would not play! He was tired and needed flour. What can I do? Yes, he says, I will not play. I go to the mayor and he tells me: ‘I am sick of the elderly Parvan. He does not respect me, I have talked to him so many times. You do what you can.’ What could I do, I took a sack of flour from my father. I took a sack full of flour from my father's house.... In our village, we loved the elderly Parvan so much. Now sometimes when we sit together in the evening, we often talk about him.“

In spite of the desperate efforts of the handful of elderly clerks and volunteers of the cultural house, no young person was willing to enrol voluntarily in the group for authentic folklore.

„When the boys grow up a bit, they become soldiers or go to the town. Those who remain in the village do not want to dance. That is why we have only two sizes of uniforms, for men and for children only.“

The teenagers who performed the calus at the village feast felt visibly ashamed in front of their friends. All clerks of the cultural house were unanimous that they succeeded in making the boys enrol in the group for authentic folklore only after countless conversations with their parents and grandparents. An additional compromise was also made: the youngsters were allowed to practice in a hall of the deserted cultural house, and were able to use the premises as best suited them. The village teenagers often gathered there, and the hall often turned to be a virtual club for boys and girls aged from 12 to 16-17 years, too adult to play children's games but too young to visit one of the three village pubs. Their participation in the căluș ritual does

not seem to result from interest in the local traditions. At best, teenagers considered those traditions tedious, if they did not strive to get rid of them on purpose, and adopt new clothes and behaviour which they conceived as modern.

The old călușari, the elderly, and the link between generations

On the other side of the coin, there were a lot of men aged 55-70 in the village of Bliznatsi who had a lively interest in traditions. It was they who criticised with subdued voices the performance of the group of youngsters and explained that „*things were not like this before*“. They did not hide their opinion: „*this is not the authentic căluș* „. Some of them belonged to the so called „old călușari“, namely the people who first resurrected the ritual in the mid 1960s under the guidance of Valentin. Their leader was the former leader of the călușari, the „vata“.

In the early 1960s, those were a group of young people considered the most progressive in the village since they were tractor drivers or operators of various agricultural machinery, hence belonged to the so called „village working class“. All of them had educations higher than those of the rest of their co-villagers, were better qualified and had travelled more. This group of people had attended courses for operating agricultural machinery, had visited relatives in the town or had travelled to the Ukraine, where a labour force from the village of Bliznatsi helped gather the wheat. These were among the few people who have travelled outside their village.

In the early 1960s, those persons listened mostly to modern music, possessed a radio and demonstrated a lively interest in the world outside. They wanted to create their own music group and play „jazz“ (a common denominator for fashionable urban music in the 1960s in Bulgaria). Those people's version about the reconstruction of the căluș slightly differed from

that of Valentin. In 1964 all of them were summoned by a certain commission and asked to perform the căluș, but were offered also a sort of compromise. They were given a hall in the cultural house which they could use as they wished, although officially it had to serve for rehearsals. All of them received instruments, were allowed to play until very late while the sole requirement was to perform from time to time not only the calus, but also other traditional dances, so that the clerks from the cultural house could boast a busy programme. In this way the group of young people played „jazz“ during village feasts when it was allowed, and traditional dances when they were obliged.

This silent compromise continued until the mid 1960s when a group of Romanian ethnologists arrived in the village. The Romanian scholars conducted fieldwork, talked to the local people, asking them mostly about the căluș.

„Then we said to each other ‘why do not we dance it as well?’. Our forefathers have danced the căluș, why do not we do the same? Was not my grandfather Marco a călușar? We decided to try. I remember it as it were yesterday. We had all gathered in the cultural house when the elderly Parvan came. He started playing while we had to dance one by one. Tsenko began but after several steps Parvan told him to go away. Then Krusto Toluloev began and the elderly Parvan said the same.... When I started to dance, the elderly Parvan did not say anything but started to play faster and faster and watch me in the legs whether I would make an error. I was young and did not get tired easily. At last the elderly Parvan stated: This one would be the vata! After that, when we would start dancing, everybody watched me to show them the steps. Even the elderly Parvan, when he began to grow older, was watching me in order to see what the steps were.“

There was only a minor place reserved for Valentin in the stories of this group of people,

his crucial role in the ritual's restoration notwithstanding. According to the memories of these persons, the decision to resurrect the calus had been theirs, a decision of a group of young people who had decided to establish a band.

Yet in the 1960s it was almost improbable that such a decision was taken entirely freely, or by the youngsters' own will only –they were neither particularly interested in the village traditions at that time, nor would the local authorities allow unsanctioned public activities.

Almost all young people from Bliznatsi at that time had dreamed of leaving the village, had been interested mainly in „jazz“, and had attempted to resettle in the town. Whilst the majority succeeded, those who remained started to consider their failure to migrate as a serious personal defeat, in some cases with dire life-long consequences. The failed migrants interpreted the resettlement in the town as upward social

mobility, because urban life is better and the possibilities for a career development are more numerous. That is why all of them made serious efforts to educate their children and send them to the town, if not in Sofia, then in the neighbouring Mihailovgrad / Montana and Kozlodui. In most of the cases, parental efforts turned out to be successful.

Yet the parents themselves had stayed in the village, and, as they remembered it, began embracing the local „tradition“. The process was slow, progressing step by step. They started to change their musical taste gradually, and to prefer traditional music instead of „jazz“ („*First I was listening only to radio 'Horizont', then switched to 'Hristo Botev' since there is more traditional music there*“). They began wearing more conservative clothes not only at the work place, but also during weekends and festive occasions



(„*I am not ashamed I am working*“). They also started drinking traditional beverages only such as wine and rakia, and not the more fashionable vodka or cognac they preferred when young. They stopped using fashionable words and expressions (coming mostly from Russian at that time).

In parallel with getting older, or with the loss of their hope of resettling in the town, members of the group of former youngsters began embracing tradition as a symbolic resource. Tradition soon became the pillar and the chief source of their authority. Their group was reconstituted as a group of elderly men who remembered how things were before, and who, thanks to their experience and connection with the past, had the moral right to instruct, supervise and control the younger. To rely on experience and on the authority of the past is part of the duties and privileges of the elderly men in the village of Bliznatsi, and probably in all villages throughout Bulgaria.

As bearers of „traditional folk culture“, the representatives of this group of people were granted the possibility of going outside of their village, of appearing on TV, and of being greeted as VIPs during large-scale events such as the national folklore festival in Koprivshitsa and its regional counterpart in Belogradchik. „*We went to Belogradchik and to Koprivshitsa with the group, and I thought, well, this is big thing!*“

While performing at the folklore feasts, the elderly men were shown on TV, were greeted by high-level officials and politicians, thus receiving a convincing demonstration that tradition was important for the state, and not only for the village. An additional proof of the significance of folk traditions for the state was also the money granted for amateur artistic activities and authentic folklore. The direct link with tradition appeared to be a specific compensation for the failure to migrate to the town.

Whose is tradition?

Then a debate began between those elderly men and the clerks from the cultural house, centring around the question of who knows more about tradition and who has the right to build his authority on it. Valentin relied above all on books. He has read extensively and has managed to construct a viable theory about the link between true tradition and the past, and about the purest, most authentic form of tradition which could be found in the old sources. Being more educated and better versed in scholarly matters than his co-villagers, Valentin enjoyed privileged access to this tradition, since he was the only person to know how to read and comment on academic literature.

In turn, the old călușari referred to the presumed direct continuity between them and the previous generations. They were proud to tell how they remembered everything their forefathers did and said, and did not accept the thesis that the link with the past could be restored by „foreigners“, on the basis of certain formalised procedures. As Valentin relied upon old sources and scholarly procedures (for instance comparison between scholarly texts on the călușari), so they put forward the direct personal (and even physical, blood) contact with the „true“ bearers of tradition, meaning their own grandfathers and grandmothers. And it was also a debate about the control, that is why they thought their more „liberal“ dance led them closer to the authentic căluș than the commentaries of the supervisor standing next to them with a book in hand and checking whether steps matched the written records. Old călușari's critiques against the restoration of the ritual were mostly directed against the control of „foreigners“, who told the călușari what had to be done.⁵ Old books were confronted with personal ties and „authenticity“, and their recollections of the past, communicated to me, a member of the academic establishment, stressed the display of

freedom and lack of restrictions, typical of căluș performances⁶.

It is curious that the „old călușari“ did not have any argument about the „hidden“ side of the ritual. While denouncing Valentin’s restoration, they paid attention to the number of steps, the direction of the tours around the table, and the outward appearance of the dancers. I have not heard any critique against the lack of a preparatory ceremony for entering in the ritual, the absence of purifying procedures at the end of the ritual cure as well as of ritual prohibitions, secret formulae, curses and spells. These were all features described in detail in the „old books“ and still an object of interest for some of the elderly women in the village (whose opinion was not sought after by all the protagonists).

Both Valentin and the „old calusari“ paid attention chiefly to the ritual decoration, the clothes of the players, and the correct sequence of the ritual dances. When debates arose, they were precisely on such issues. Both groups of protagonists considered the performance of the căluș as a kind of **procedure** whereby authentic tradition was restored. Participants in the ritual realised clearly that they put on stage a moment of the past and struggled to behave like people from bygone times. The boys took off the watches from their wrists, made large and heavy steps, and attempted to speak with coarse low voices as their grandfathers did.

This was a procedure through which the past was restored and collective memory mobilised. Debates were held around some parts of that procedure (how many steps, in what direction) or who could claim the right to use and interpret the ritual (the clerks of the cultural house or the old călușari, the erudite or the local elders). Discussions erupted about what kind of community was constituted through the ritual (the village with its local tradition or the nation, or the dispersed families), or around questions of

power, authority, and conflicting interests. Yet there existed a virtual consensus as regards the mechanisms within the procedure itself; and there was concord on the various parts of the procedure which did not, however, necessitate social consensus (Alexander 1994).⁷

The căluș and village sabor

As it was mentioned at the beginning of the article, the performance of căluș is part of the village feast, called *sabor*. The teenage călușari began performing there in 1995, two years after the last presentation of the group, which had been formed in the 1960s. The sabor is celebrated once per year, often on the day of the patron saint of the village, or on some national holiday. The neighbouring villages usually coordinate their respective sabor, and the whole system of these feasts was established relatively recently, during the last decades of the socialist period.

The sabor is one of the rare occasions, which reunites different branches of the local families, dispersed during the grand exodus rural in the 1960s and 1970s, when more than one third of the population moved from the village to the cities, completely changing the demographic situation in the country. The boys, who perform the calus, do not actually live in the village. They come for summer holidays to Bliznatsi, to meet their grandparents and to give their parents a few weeks of respite. The relations between grandparents and grandchildren in Bliznatsi are a fascinating topic on itself, because the parents usually try to construct a more prestigious, modern, urban, and Bulgarian identity for their children. This involves a break with the tradition of name inheritance (the grandchildren would not receive the old-fashioned or Romanian-sounding name of their grandparents), and a careful distancing from the rural traditions associated with lower class and backwardness (including a strong discouraging of the use of

Romanian dialect words in their everyday speech). All this constitutes an ambitious enterprise which could not be carried out without the constant support in cash and in kind from the rural grandparents.

The young generations generally support this effort and the fact that they take part in căluș is much more of an achievement for their grandparents, who invest a lot of effort in persuading the young men, and often directly bribe them into taking part in the ritual. Together, grandparents and teenagers visit Valentin and the călușari from the 1960s to receive further instructions on the local tradition from rival authorities, and share their own recollections on the ritual from the distant, mostly socialist, past.

It seems that the events from the mid 1960s are not mentioned in these recollections, and the ritual is presented as part of an interrupted local tradition. In this narrative, local actors managed to recuperate the ritual, and now it exists independently from the system of state sponsored festivals. It became a focal point for a variety of issues, which dominate the life of the local community – the competition between local, national, and ethnic identities, the modernization of relations between generations, both aspired to and painfully experienced, and the transformations of kinship structures of the extended rural-urban families.

Notes:

¹ The names of the village and of the chief protagonists have been changed.

² Two main versions of căluș have been registered in Bulgaria. Both of them were typical for its Northern part of the country, the Danubian plain, mostly in areas where a Romanian-speaking population was also represented in the past. The version registered in the Western part of Northern Bulgaria was characterised by the presence of vata only, while that in the Eastern part had vata and mute, the latter sometimes playing a more important role than the vata. The Western version was focused on healing of people stricken by Rusalja, while that on the East was mostly a fertility ritual. A central element of the ritual in the Western Bulgaria was the trance of one or two calusari, while such trances were lacking in Eastern Bulgaria. It seems that the Western version is close to the ritual in Southern Oltenia and especially Dolj county in Romania, while the Eastern version is closer to the ritual in the Bucharest region, as described by Oprisan. However, in both versions there was a group of adult males, rather hierarchically organised, led by one undisputed leader; the

members were supposed to join the group after proving their physical and moral qualities and passing a ritualised initiation. Last but not least, both versions of the ritual had virtually disappeared somewhere in the interwar period, or earlier.

³ According to some people, the costume had been prepared in the town of Chiprovtsi. Several local patriots claim that the forefathers of the villagers of Bliznatsi were the rebels from Chiprovtsi, who, after the rebellion of the seventeenth century, went to Romania before returning back to Bulgaria. It was during their stay in Romania that the forefathers managed to learn some Romanian words, which would explain the Romanian dialect the elderly people of Bliznatsi are still speaking today. Therefore Chiprovtsi is the ideal place to look for the *truly authentic* local costume.

⁴ The villagers of Bliznatsi did not, in practice, use the new name of Mikhailovgrad, i.e. Montana.

⁵ „Old kalushari were different. They had more time; they used to rest in the afternoon and were thus able to dance until the evening. They could dance wherever they

liked. One day in front of the mayor's office, the other in front of the monument....I tell you, the old kalushari danced in a more liberal way. They did follow the steps yet were more liberal. (...) The old kalushari played in a more liberal manner. I remember, they would become really angry. The elderly Marco, the elderly Dencho, when they started storming around, uh, uh, uh! And brandish the stick like this, uh, uh, uh! They were all red, started shaking. They got really angry, I tell you. When I start dancing now, I fall in a kind of trance, begin playing in a more liberal way and this Valentin immediately shouts at me 'you, there?'

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⁶ In a different context, when discussing the căluș with researchers during the state sponsored festivals of authentic folklore, they would stress the closeness of their performance to the written academic tradition, since this is one of the main criteria of the jury. In another different context, while instructing their grandchildren performers, they stressed the self-control of the ancient calusari, who were able to dance several hours in a row.

⁷ Compare the critique of Jeffrey Alexander against the authors who are ready to grant „temporal if not ontological advantage“ of social structure over the ritual (Alexander 1994: 220).

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