

REVIEW

of dissertation for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "PhD" in the professional field 3.1 "Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies" (doctoral program Cultural Studies – Cultural Heritage and local Identity")

Topic of the dissertation: Trauma and celebration. Sacralization and transformation of commemorative celebration

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The dissertation proposed for defense includes an introduction, 5 chapters divided into subchapters and paragraphs, a summary and a conclusion, a bibliography and 5 appendices (mostly photos, within the exposition). The total length of the main text (including the bibliography) amounts to 151 pages, and the appendices number 34 pages, which include a list of sites studied, a list of important dates in the cultural calendar of each site, copies of media publications, photographic material from field observations, and 3 short interviews. The bibliography consists of a total of 116 titles in Bulgarian and English. The abstract correctly and comprehensively presents the structure and content of the thesis. The attached three publications on the topic testify to a consistent scientific interest and a consistent effort to mark and refine the research field. Both the abstract and the publications fully respond to the educational and scholarly criteria for a PhD thesis.

In the current context of loud public talk about "patriotism", "enduring national interests" and "honor to the ancestors" by political circles and parties such as "Revival", openly declaring their anti-liberal ideology, an ever-expanding cultural market of patriotic items and experiences, and indiscriminate use of ethnonymic clichés and images in various media and social networks, Iliyana Khubenova's dissertation achieves, in a compelling yet unbiased way, a deep understanding of the construction of local/regional/national identities through reference to leading historical narratives and cultural heritages, and especially through participation in commemorative celebrations and rituals. Her work is devoid of any pathos

and sensationalism or edification with regard to the analysis of the emotional uses of the past with their political and media framings. Already in the introduction, Khubenova identifies the sacralisation and romanticisation of participants in emancipation movements as characteristic of both Bulgaria and Eastern Europe. She argues that it leads to the construction and development of narrative and visual regimes of courage, willingness to sacrifice, selfless love of country, etc.

All in all, throughout the research process, from field observations to written findings and conclusions, Khubenova manages to maintain a strong anthropological focus, borrowing and unfolding the perspective of the participants themselves, and to be more precise, of the most involved and active of them. This is the perspective of the so-called ordinary person, who, despite being politically targeted and not infrequently tempted to fall into patriotic exaltations, nevertheless follows his own route in the historical past and "inhabits" and "belongs" in a specific way to certain places of memory such as Batak, Perushchitsa, Karlovo and Skravena.

Although Khubenova repeatedly stresses that one of the tasks of her dissertation is to trace the construction of a collective/national/identity through the narration of and commemoration of the heroes/heroic events of the April Uprising of 1876, and indeed, within the exposition, to carefully highlight transformations and functionalities that stabilize community ties and identifications, she does not leave the symbolic and discursive space of her respondents. The same applies to the search for an answer to the central research question of transforming a traumatic and sacred event into a celebration with elements of joy and entertainment.

It is no coincidence that an entire subchapter is devoted to "audiences" or to the various group/collective identities and roles that the various participants in the celebration "experienced". Even in terms of setting the conceptual apparatus and methodological premises, Khubenova defends an extremely modest, "grounded" and devoid of any scientific mannerism, position that lends a particular realism and persuasiveness to the results. Thus, she chooses direct observation as the leading method in order to highlight "the importance of each element (of the celebrations) for society and the organizers". She is clearly aware of the possibility that in structured interviews respondents may "distance themselves" and "give unreliable answers," and skillfully matches information gathered from institutional archives with that transmitted "by word of mouth."

Last but not least, for the clarification of the key concepts - *commemoration, mourning, traumatic, sacred, celebration, identities, national/nation, national identity, collective memory*, Khubenova relies both on established authors in the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, cultural heritage and cultural identities such as Maurice Halbwachs, Mircea Eliade, Pierre Nora, Reinhart Koselleck, Jan Assmann, François Hartog, etc. , as well as the 2018 edition of the "Bulgarian Dictionary" by Lyubomir Andreychin (et al.). Such an original but relatively risky methodological step supports indeed the directly stated intention in the introduction to decode "the meanings that ordinary people invest", but also to describe "established frameworks and meanings established in cultural sciences and the humanities in general".

This same approach, extremely sensitive to reflexivity "from below" vs. scientific reflection, set out in the introduction and first chapter, dictates the other decisions regarding the structure and content emphases of the dissertation. Thus, in Chapter Two, which is devoted to the historical framework of commemorative celebrations, canonical and popular readings of classic authors and works such as Ivan Vazov's "Epic of the Forgotten" and Zahari Stoyanov's "Extracts from Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings", extremely well-known accounts and reviews of contemporaries about the April Uprising find correct presentation and analysis with critical reference to no less classic historiographical works such as that of Dimitar Strashimirov or Ivan Hadjiyski and with extensive commentary on contemporary debates and research. This allows Khubenova to trace the interweaving of facts and myths, of traumatic and ideological contents in the celebrations as part of the "grand narrative of the struggle for freedom".

Already in chapter three, the research gaze turns entirely to the histories of the celebrations themselves, and the weaving in question receives careful genealogical and chronological cuts. Here Khubenova demonstrates excellent skills in working with "small", local and regional narratives as well, drawing on various local history works, biographies, archival documents, media and scientific publications. She does not simply trace the celebrations in different moments and epochs (after the Liberation, after 1944, after 1989), but distinguishes important macro and micro historical contexts and dynamics of cultural repertoires along the axis of local - national pride, local traumatic event - national cult to the heroes of the April Uprising, religious - secular character of the celebration. In this apparent effort to move beyond factual reality and to achieve depth in her analysis of the development of commemorative practices in Batak, Perushchitsa, Karlovo and Skravena, she somewhat unexpectedly returns to the

clarification of the terminology guiding the dissertation and to the problem of the compatibility of communal patterns of remembering of an extraordinary, traumatic experience and the scholarly specifications.

Here she introduces additional but key concepts for the later discussion, such as 'historical trauma', "postmemory" and "geographies of horror". The chapter's inclusion of fiercely debated, historiographical versions and interpretations of the memory/memory traces of the uprising, and in particular the scandal surrounding the Batak case, is also somewhat puzzling. Although this inclusion seems largely problematic in terms of structuring the text, the very presentation of the media and political campaign against Martina Baleva and Ulf Brunnbauer's project in 2007, which mobilized the moral efforts to defend the national honor of well-known Bulgarian historians, as well as the tracing of the resistances and initiatives around the canonization of the martyrs of Batak in 2011 can be defined as one of the contributions of the thesis. Apart from getting into the kitchen of "political ventriloquism", it thus highlights the specificities of the dangerous terrain of the abuse of historical knowledge. Hence, conceptual links are drawn to one of the main research theses on celebrations "as sacred dates on the calendar of events through which a community (local or national) places itself in the global framework as a nation with a glorious past, positioning itself in the world" (p.85).

Chapter four is key to the research insofar as it focuses entirely on the organisation and conduct of commemorative celebrations in the present, presenting and summarising the results of the fieldwork. Khubenova's self-reflexivity in the process of collecting the interviews and articulating her personal observations makes a wonderful impression. For example, she manages to extract additional meaning from the situation of COVID-19 and the question of the work of the collective memory and festivity in a pandemic is raised. The concrete analysis of (the realisation of) the scenarios and symbolic repertoires of the celebrations also reveals a rare effort and skill to move beyond the accumulation of empirical data and obvious conclusions. It even manages to identify different forms of celebrations according to the configuration of religious and secular elements and the diversity of contents of the cultural program under the unifying theme of the heroic death of national heroes. For example, while in Batak there is a clear division between the religious and the secular and the programme is quite rich in terms of festive events that mobilise most of the citizens, in Karlovo the centre of everything is the service of the memorial service in the St. Nicholas church and the gathering of the elite of the town.

With the same precision and analyticism, Khubenova "walks around" the audience, or more precisely the participants not directly involved in the organization of the celebrations, who belong to different "social, class, religious and territorial categories". Of these, the most colourful and vivid are the rockers, whose subcultural identity in the Bulgarian version implies the demonstration of patriotic devotion and reverence to the glorious native past. At the same time, the strong emotional investment of the local people in the celebrations gives grounds to confirm the leading hypothesis of the transformation of the mournful commemoration of the deaths of the participants in the April Uprising into a social celebration in the deepest sense of the word, comparable, in Khubenova's words, to the celebration of Christmas and Easter.

The final fifth chapter, in addition to closing the loop of contextualizations of narrative and visual modes of the heroic national past and completing the argument of the cultural and social values of commemorative celebrations, achieves the densest possible description of the symbolic universes of the memory sites studied. It testifies to Khubenova's serious analytical potential and her distinctive ability to maintain a critical yet "warm" distance from what she observed in the fieldwork. Again, the individual parts - 'fragments' - of the celebrations are examined, but the emphasis is no longer on their formal presence/absence and sequence, but on the horizons of meaning within which they are laid and which they set in turn. Thus, in terms of religious ritual, what stands out is the awakening of the living among the dead, in terms of reenactments - the foregrounding of the euphoria of the (winning of) freedom or of the tragedy of patriotic suicide, the realization of the connection between the sacred and the profane in the fireworks-check, the (de)politicization of the speeches of the "honored guests", etc. This chapter also confirms in a comprehensive form the thesis of the transformation of trauma into festive revelry with a long excursus into specific, seemingly small but significant changes in the organization and experience of celebrations. Last but not least, the gradual shift of the meanings of the national holiday towards the stabilization of family and generational solidarities in the village and the city and towards the provision of specific forms of entertainment to a consumerist society is discussed.

Finally, the conclusion correctly and convincingly brings together all the observations and assumptions and sets intriguing directions for future research.

Summing up all that has been presented so far, the dissertation unquestionably possesses all the qualities and values of a representative scholarly work that raises highly topical

contemporary issues and problematizes the construction of national and local mythologies and affective corpora of belonging to the native/Bulgarian. While it asserts a predominantly historical anthropological perspective, it demonstrates a skill for identifying different interdisciplinary conceptual apparatus and factualities in support of the analysis of fieldwork data and opens up new spaces of meaning of the experience of cultural heritages. I fully agree with the definition of contribution in the autoreferat - "the construction of an original conceptual model for the study of regional celebrations of national holidays and heroes".

It is with a view to the future implementation and development of this model that I take the liberty of making a few recommendations and questions. It seems to me that the analytical part of the text would only benefit from drawing more serious genealogical connections between the religious and secular symbolic repertoires of commemorative celebrations. Religious festivals and events have always had their social and/or profane uses - fairs and fair streets are not only an invention of the modern consumer, but had also been part of the mental maps of saint veneration since the early modern era, if not before, the space on/around the church is as much a gathering place for locals to exchange social experiences as the piazza and, in their private version, the panahidas/memorial services often culminate in the distribution of food and lively conversations, etc. It is equally important to outline the ever-increasing role of all types of media not just in the coverage of the celebrations but also in the changes in their conceptualization and organization. In this regard, I would like to ask Khubenova how she envisages the future of the celebrations - does she expect them to undergo new transformations and in what directions or does she assume a lasting adherence to the existing scenarios

In view of all that has been said so far, I confidently propose that Iliana Khubenova be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science in the professional field 3.1 Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies.

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