

## **EXAMINER'S REPORT**

### **on Dissertation Thesis**

Entitled: "Indian organizations in Europe" (Ethnographic research on cultural-historical reenactment groups)

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For awarding the educational and research degree Doctor in Ethnology, in the Field of Education 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

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The autobiography of Lyubomir Kyumurdzhiev introduces us to a colleague - a philologist, historian and ethnologist, who, in addition to his professional path as a person dealing with books and words, is an active participant and one of the creators of a group for historical reenactments with a lasting interest in the culture of North American Indians. I mention these aspects of Kyumurdzhiev's biography because they are key to reading his dissertation, which, although written during the regular doctoral studies (2020-2023) at the Department of Ethnology of the SU "St. Kliment Ohridski", has been in the works for (at least) 30 years. The doctoral student is among the Indianists in Bulgaria, who not only studies the culture of the North American Indians, but also initiated the creation of the Bulgarian society "Eagle Circle". His position as an "insider" largely determines the specific research approach - autoethnography combined with research and analysis of the wider European and, particularly, Eastern European context of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The topic of the dissertation: "Indian Organizations in Europe" (An Ethnographic Study of Groups for Cultural-Historical Reconstruction) poses several important questions related not only to the large issues of creating communities and groups related to the reconstruction of cultures distant in time and space, but also for the functioning of these communities and groups based on cultural-historical reconstructions in modern societies. By studying the case of Indian societies/societies of Indianists in Europe, and Bulgaria in particular, the dissertation engages in the scholarly discussion of topics such as: How (modern and postmodern) people experience their otherness, what are the characteristics of the significant "other", why the image of American Indians plays such a role for Europeans in different historical and political contexts. Questions, the answers to which lead to an understanding of the identity and ways of (self) identification of the postmodern man. From this point of view, the research of Lyubomir Kyumurdzhiev is timely, relevant and significant.

The dissertation consists of 224 non-standard pages and is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, which contains print and internet resources in Bulgarian, English, German and Russian.

The goal of presenting Indianists organizations in Europe, although too broadly defined, finds its concretizations in the set sub-goals and tasks of the dissertation work. They are: to trace the ways of

creating Indian organizations in Europe and in this context to present the creation of the Bulgarian society "Eagle Circle", to describe the ways of functioning of networks and interactions both between individual members, between organizations, but also between them and the Native Americans. The analysis of individual aspects of the creation and functioning of these organizations is placed in the broader context of the discursive-ideological construction of images of American Indians "otherness" created by art and literature and the various mechanisms for "adapting" these images in the various geopolitical contexts of the 20th and 21st centuries. This task is very ambitious and can hardly be completed with a dissertation because it implies interdisciplinary research and working with a huge archive of materials. Lyubomir Kyumurdzhiev has correctly placed his limitations on the ethnographic research, which emphasizes the data from interviews with people, participants in different groups and their opinions about the different mechanisms of interactions and dynamics in the development of studied groups. The dissertation itself correctly states the number of interlocutors, called respondents: "My respondents - about fifty in number - are mainly Indians from Bulgaria, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Belgium, Lithuania, Latvia and other European countries. They are of both sexes, but men predominate," (p. 15). The people who took part in the research were familiar with the research question and the position of the doctoral student, their real names were anonymized and characteristics such as gender and age at the time of the interview were preserved. As a contribution, I can note that the PhD candidate has outlined a "profile of the Indianist", based on his long-term observations and interactions with people from different groups and communities, which is a very important aspect of the overall analysis of the complex mechanisms of identification with and through Indians in the individual and collective activities of the members of these groups. I would define the methodology of the field research as "autoethnography" - a reflexive and sometimes "thick ethnographic description" based not only on the opinions and assessments of the researcher's interlocutors, but also on his own experiences as an "insider" and a person who participated in the events. The position of the "insider" implies additional methodological efforts to maintain the boundary between researcher and participant, between autoethnography and autobiography. In the dissertation, this boundary is also set methodologically, through targeted interviews, conversations with people and evaluations from the last three years, when Lubomir Kyumurdzhiev worked on the dissertation text. Another approach is to reflexively return to and make sense of one's previous experiences as an Indianist and a person interested in a foreign culture in view of the ethnographic case study. I would rate this rethinking as sufficiently reflexive and critical with arguments provided that allow it to draw conclusions about the dynamics of different groups and communities for re-enactments of American Indian culture. As already mentioned, this is a dissertation that uses a classical ethnographic approach, but is structured in a non-classical way. Although we do not initially find the "expected" theoretical framework, theory is woven into the narrative and analysis, and the main categories characterizing groups, communities, individuals, interactions, forms of cooperation or opposition, discursive constructions of roles and identities are brought out. I would evaluate this research strategy as correct and adequate to the goals and tasks, allowing the author to draw relevant conclusions. In this sense, the research methodology comes closer, in my opinion, to the "grounded theory" approach often used in ethnological and anthropological research.

The structure of the dissertation is chosen to allow the general context to be introduced with the historical development of the complex mechanisms of the construction of the problem of Native American otherness, the play of identities between Europe and the "New Territories", and the implications of this meeting of the worlds. I am not a historian and cannot evaluate the sufficiency of the conclusions from the point of view of historical knowledge, but for the purposes of the ethnographic case study, I think the PhD candidate has done a good job of delineating the contexts. In the introduction, in which the goals, tasks, terrain, methods and approach of the study are presented, the main terms,

concepts and categories are substantiated, which will subsequently be analyzed such as the pairs of Indianists-Indians, Natives Americans - Euro-Indians, etc. In the first chapter, the theoretical and methodological framework of the problematic of historical reconstructions as dimensions of modern identity, a sense of community and belonging, even of the "New Age" identities of post-modern person, is set. The PhD candidate correctly presents leading research to give the context of the emergence of the Bulgarian case in its local and global dimensions. The second chapter "Freedom... Vinetu" could be an independent dissertation study of the cultural aspects of the construction of the image of "Indians" through art - literature, cinema and television and through the specific geopolitical division of the world especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This analysis, although more eclectic because of the vast material with which the doctoral student has to deal, actually traces the red threads of the mechanisms of community construction, which are analyzed in the third chapter, "Forest Skills, Bison Days, and Pow-Wows." This chapter provides an ethnographic description of the mechanisms and practices of 'being Indian in Europe'. Here, the PhD student uses a wealth of data for several organizations in Europe, trying to outline common features by describing standardized practices of community life. On the other hand, it analyzes the differences between organizations using data from its own extensive field experience and from its interviews, conversations and correspondence with community members from different countries. The distinctive classification of Indianist types and their relation to reconstructing "authenticity" is, I believe, a contribution both as field material and as a theoretical achievement. This description largely approximates the bricolage and "New Age" identity of postmodern man, namely: visual resemblance – a kind of mimesis and material culture; practicing "being Indian in spirit" through bodily empathy, camping and celebrating, and "spiritual empathy" (p. 169). I can note as a contribution the observation on the reconfigurations of the different layers of identity in the fine-tuning of the dominants, depending on the centers of (self) identification. The example of members of Native American communities with left-wing political ideas who identify with Native Americans as victims of the colonial system and motivation for solidarity actions to improve the real situation of local indigenous people in the United States during the Iron Curtain world is interesting, and the drawing of red lines in the otherwise global and mutually supportive communities of Indianists in crisis situations such as the collapse of major states and Europe's most dramatic contemporary conflict, the war in Ukraine. This fine analysis of the "switches" of registers and situations of identification and taking a stand towards the war not only by Russian and Ukrainian community members, but also by other nationalities places boundaries in otherwise "imagined communities" according to Benedict Anderson. In my opinion, this is a contributing result of the dissertation research that will help us better understand the reactions of late modern man in situations of military conflict and crisis situations, when national and international institutions are not "total social institutions". Following the logic of the dissertation, namely - from the general to the particular - in the fourth chapter, the case of the creation of the Bulgarian organization of Indianists - "Eagle Circle" is analyzed. Here the autoethnographic elements are densest. The PhD candidate describes the foundation and development of this organization in Bulgaria, following the already described model of the creation of related organizations in Europe, built in the previous chapters. Although at first glance a special case, the 30-year history of the "Eagle Circle" society is significant for the 30-year history of the Bulgarian transition, as a history of the search for identity. I think this part is most comprehensive and has the potential to be further developed in separate publications. In the Conclusion, the PhD candidate summarizes the main conclusions of the chapters, but also offers an analysis of a macro-community called "The Last of the Mohicans in Europe", which, in my opinion, could be part of the main text of the dissertation.

In every dissertation there is potential – stated and unsaid – for many more and subsequent studies. The dissertation under consideration does not make an exception - it presents an understanding of a modern phenomenon, a part of which are the groups for the historical reenactment of the culture of

the Indians in Europe. This rethinking is through many years of life and academic experience of the doctoral student and is a request to publish the dissertation as a monographic book, which I highly recommend. In view of a future publication, I would make a recommendation for a more explicit methodological demarcation of the author's "I" as a participant in the events and the researcher who observes the processes and makes sense of this experience through his theoretical training as an ethnologist. In my opinion, there is also a need for further clarifications on the methodology and methods of analysis of literary sources, films and media in the construction of the considered images of Indians and Indianists.

The sources of the ideas that are referenced are correctly cited in the text. I have not noticed any cases of plagiarism. The research contributions of the study are correctly presented. I have no personal impressions of the PhD student and declare no conflict of interest. The abstract correctly reflects the content of the dissertation.

The doctoral student has published the results of his research in seven publications in Bulgarian, he has participated in scientific forums and research projects, and his ideas are in scientific circulation. All of this shows academic maturity and independence. The respectful attitude towards the academic achievements of the Department of Ethnology of Sofia University, to which Lyubomir Kyumyurdzhiev actively contributes with his activities, as well as with gratitude to his two scientific supervisors, is also impressive.

Conclusion: Having in mind the stated contributions and qualities of the scholarly work, not only in presenting a very heterogeneous metacommunity of Indianists in Europe in a specific geopolitical and historical context of the 20th and 21st centuries, but also in delineating the specificities and aspects of the identity of postmodern people who join groups for cultural-historical reenactments as a phenomenon of the modern world, I vote "for" awarding the educational and research degree "doctor" in Ethnology, in the field of education 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, cultural studies of Lyubomir Georgiev Kyumyurdzhiev.

15. 08. 2023

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