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DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PROCESSES IN AREAS OF DEPOPULATION

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Abstract. Cultural and religious processes in a given region influence the identity of the individual and the society as a whole. These processes also determine to a large extent the state of social relations in each regional and local community. The paper attempts to outline characteristic tendencies in the formation of a new (local) identity in the early 21st century through the methods of fieldwork and ethnological research. The research was conducted in the territory of Strandzha mountain in South-Eastern Bulgaria. Two specific examples are examined, that of *nestinarstvo* (also known as *anastenaria* in Greek) and that of the customs and ritual practices related to the chapel of St. Ivan Rilski in the village of Byala Voda. Through these examples, the paper investigates the specificity of customary-ritual complexes, while also drawing broader conclusions and outlining the dynamics of cultural and religious processes in depopulated regions.

Keywords: cultural transformation; religious dynamics; ritual complex; Strandzha mountain; depopulation

Cultural and religious processes in a given region influence the identity of the individual and that of society as a whole. These processes also determine, to a large extent, the state of social relations in each regional and local community. The present paper attempts to outline several characteristic tendencies in the formation of a new (local) identity in the early 21st century through the methods of ethnological fieldwork and research. Focusing on the revitalization of elements of cultural and religious tradition and practice, the fieldwork was carried out in the territory of the Strandzha mountain in South-Eastern Bulgaria. Concerning the allowed space for this paper, we have selected to examine in detail two specific and illustrative examples from the region. Through these examples, we will seek to draw broader conclusions and to outline the dynamics of cultural and religious processes in the areas of depopulation.

For a cultural system to function successfully, it needs the cohesion of images and motives, of practices and beliefs. The dynamics of such a system is created

through contacts at different levels, as “models of the world grow into complete dynamic worldviews” (following Bogdanov 1999). The following pages attempt to demonstrate how, in contemporary times, real and reflected images combine as we witness the formation of a new (local) identity in a region with high levels of demographic, social and economic crisis. The investigated process shows a compensation of other modern markers of local identity that dropped over the years.

The area of fieldwork and research

The region of Strandzha has been attracting scholarly interest from researchers in both the field of the social sciences and the humanities during various historical periods. The local specificity of the folk culture in this region is one of the components that undoubtedly allows to consider Strandzha as an example of a specific cultural environment while also being of the most significant reasons for this lasting scholarly interest. In the first decades of the 21st century, the Strandzha region is characterized by a severe demographic crisis¹. As a result of the outflow of population, significant changes have taken place in the cultural niche of the region. According to official statistics, the South-Eastern region of Bulgaria, which includes the Strandzha region, has the following demographic parameters. In 2011, the total population of the region was 1 078 002 inhabitants and, in 2015, it had 1 052 527 inhabitants. The demographic outflow is combined with another serious problem, the ageing population and the depopulation (the region has villages with one or two inhabitants). A shift in the ethnic composition is also taking place in the region. Additionally, the young and able population is predominantly of Roma origin and occupies the niches vacated by the displaced population of Bulgarian ethnic origin. These processes have their roots in the mid-20th century, when political doctrine and objective historical reality turned Strandzha into a “closed region”, due to its proximity to the state border (Markova 2022, p. 42). This period provoked changes in the livelihood of the population due to land nationalization and caused the decline of agriculture and animal husbandry. During the socialist period the livelihood of the settlements in the interior of Strandzha became gradually associated with the necessities of the military units deployed in the region. The religious culture of the local population was profoundly influenced by state propaganda and interference in the natural rhythm of its development after 1944. As a result, religious and popular culture became intertwined, as the popular interpretation of religiosity gained importance (*Ibid.*). These processes were also influenced by the state doctrine aiming at the preservation of folk culture through the *chitalishta* (cultural centers), their groups and activities, that were mainly called upon by the state to preserve the wealth of folk songs. In more recent times, there has also been a tendency for the revitalization of folk culture and, in particular, of the region’s emblematic customary-ritual complex discussed in this paper, *nestinarstvo* (also known as *anasternaria* in Greek).

By analyzing specific customary and religious practices, we can trace the evolution of characteristic processes in a given society at a certain stage of its historical development and highlight the influence of objective reality on transformations occurring within this society. Following the theory of social capital (per Bourdieu), the paper examines examples of inverted practice where the symbolic capital is constructed in the absence of social capital. The image of the region and its identity in the public space are created by the revitalization of religious symbols and practices, as well as by traditional cultural elements. This new local identity is used by the inhabitants of the region as a coping strategy to deal with the crisis in all of its aspects.

The author team had the opportunity to map similar processes in the Northwest region. The analysis of environmental changes and dynamics in areas of depopulation allows us to draw parallels and differences in the formation of new local identities. As a dynamic category, it does not remain aloof from demographic processes related to population ageing, intensive outflows through emigration waves, negative demographic balance with low birth rates and high death rates, population ageing, etc. (Sugareva, Dimitrova 2018, p. 4). There is no way that the identity and local forms of culture will not also be affected by the change in the ethnic and confessional composition of the population, as the vacated places are settled by new waves of Roma who are not indigenous to the specific regions. In this situation, culture transforms and invents new forms and elements that respond to the changed conditions or have a compensatory mechanism. It is the observation of similar processes in two different regions that gives the authors grounds to draw conclusions that can be considered relevant to a wider area. We emphasize explicitly that we consider here only the case of Strandzha, without the study claiming to be comparative. Our main point is to note the fact that national political and economic frameworks often create preconditions for similar processes in which ethnologists find local differences.

The present study was conducted using the classic methods of Ethnology and Cultural anthropology – observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, and autobiographical narratives. The specific interviews on the topic of the project exceed 30, some of them in-depth, others only marking the problem. The team's field observations span over a decade. The fieldwork makes it possible to take account of differences over the years, changes in the observed villages, the influence of commercial culture, the effect of the popularisation of custom, and processes of new sacralisation of particular sites. In a situation of severe demographic attrition, such as is persistently observed in the studied region, it is difficult to justify the selection of respondents; rather, the team sought to speak with each of the people living on the ground. An additional angle to the research is provided by the interviews conducted with people external to the locality, who nevertheless recognise customary-ritual practices as significant and symbolic for the culture of the entire region, and even

at the national level. In this sense, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the research has a solid empirical basis, which provides grounds for the relevance of the conclusions drawn.

The nature of cultural and religious processes in Strandzha has been the subject of research carried out by generations of scholars who draw our attention to the traditional type of cultures. They also outline the presence of a pragmatic existence and a sacred history in the process of functioning of this system. These aspects of the human culture and the way they are reconciled highlight a mechanism through which the social experience is acquired and show how the cultural model of the world, inherent to every society, is realized.

As previously stated, this paper will focus on two examples. The first touches upon the customary ritual complex of *nestinarstvo* which is characteristic for the local culture of the region. Its choice is justified by the fact that, as far as the Bulgarian ethnic territory is concerned, it is practiced only in Strandzha and, in recent years (through the intervention of the local and central authorities), *nestinarstvo* has become a kind of emblem of the Strandzha region.

Secondly, the paper analyses the network of sacred *topoi*, ayazms and chapels, as well as the oral traditions associated with them. The Christian identity has always occupied a central place for the local population, and this identity is syncretized in narratives related to sacred sites as well as in the practice of the *nestinarstvo* customary ritual complex. For this paper, we will trace the religious practice associated with the service in the chapels through the example of one emblematic site for Strandzha, the St. Ivan Rilski chapel, within the territory of the village of Byala Voda.

To get a more complete picture of the cultural environment of the examined community, the paper will also discuss the surrounding ecosystem. The environment, however, is not so much of an influence as a biophysical factor, as it plays a role through the interpretation that it is given by the people (Encyclopedia 1996: 256). This also applies to the past, as interpreted by the community. Knowledge of past realities accompanies the development of any human community, but, in the case of collective cultures and those who bear oral tradition, the past plays a dominant role, the community being able to recognize and to reconstruct this knowledge, according to internal frameworks and standards of this particular community (Markova 2022, p. 44). Lastly, insofar as the study of a cultural system inevitably raises the question of space and its scope, the paper will also provide information on selected moments of the settlements' development for the examined community.

The village of Bulgari: territorial scope and ecological features

The description that follows focuses on processes in the village of Bulgari but it applies to all settlements on the territory of Strandzha. The village of Bulgari has been selected for this paper as a representative settlement, given its connection

with *nestinarstvo*, as this is the only village in Bulgaria where this customary ritual complex survives.

The village of Bulgari is located about 51 km southeast of the regional town of Burgas, about 14 km southwest of the municipal center of Tsarevo and about 21 km northeast of the town of Malko Tarnovo. In the past, the village of Bulgari was a typical *kolibari* village. In Strandzha, the term *kolibari* designates settlements that have, in addition to the houses in the village, groups of 4 – 5 *kolibi* (huts) in separate localities where the fields of the land owners were located. *Kolibari* families spent the period until late autumn on the huts, working the land, reaping, threshing, raising the cattle; they returned to their villages for the winter.

The village of Bulgari is characterized by a closed and conservative community culture and depopulation is a serious problem for the development of the customs. The population outflow is far from being modern phenomenon².

The official data from the statistics is eloquent: a serious decline in the population occurred after the political changes in Bulgaria in 1944, and after the establishment of the socialist regime and the nationalization of agriculture. The land loss forced part of the rural population to seek new opportunities, settling in the cities as workers in the newly established industrial enterprises. These changes, that occurred by force, harmed the environmental and social sustainability of the region. Depopulation leads to a drastic shift in popular culture. The natural bearers of culture are forced to leave their familiar environment. At some point, the state begins to manage folk culture to protect it from destruction. This happens through the cultural houses, *chitalishta*, and through the intervention of local authorities.

Nestinarstvo (Anastenaria)

By the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, *nestinarstvo* was widespread in Strandzha and Eastern Thrace, in many villages with Bulgarian or Greek population³. After the period 1912 – 1927, when radical political and demographic changes took place in this part of the Balkans, *nestinarstvo* as a whole customary ritual complex remained existing only in the village of Bulgari. Settlers who considered themselves Greeks maintained the custom in present-day northern Greece⁴. *Nestinarstvo*, the ritual play (i.e. dance) over fire, has not escaped the attention of scholars (ethnologists, folklorists, historians)⁵, and has been the focus of sustained interest by the mass media and, in recent years, by the tourist industry. The ritual in its (relatively) pure form, which can be called ‘classical’ with a caveat, has undergone changes and transformations in the modern era. A significant reason for this is the depopulation. Elements of this, once unified, system are given independent existence. They also become part of the contemporary national narrative (Markova 2022, p. 65). The custom changes to such an extent that accents of this system acquire a new meaning. One of the reasons for this transformation is the dynamic of religious attitudes.

A second line in this process is the development of the modern tourism industry. This presupposes “playing” with folk culture. Individual components, taken out of context, are given special significance and symbolism, their “antiquity”, “uniqueness” or mysticism are deliberately emphasized. These are exploited as a symbolic capital by the state cultural doctrine in an attempt to build a better image for Bulgaria in the European space (Troeva 2021, p. 356). A highlight in this process is the idea of the Bulgarian lands as the bosom of the most ancient civilizations, the local culture of Strandzha being referred to as a “sacred territory”. The meaning of the *nestinarstvo* ritual is also explored in this direction. After the inclusion of the ritual in the UNESCO Representative List of the World’s Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009, *nestinarstvo* has gained enormous popularity and is even perceived as one of the emblems of Bulgaria. The essence of the customary ritual complex remains known only to the narrow circle of “scientific circulation”. The changes affect the synthesis of the sign systems that make up the ritual; while the inseparability between the symbolic and the utilitarian is changing. The psychological attitude of the participants in the ritual is also subject to change, as is the behavior of the observers, direct witnesses of the ritual actions. Politics also has intervened, and, in recent years, the local authorities’ understanding of the development of the ritual-ritual system began to dominate. In this context, the local authorities attempt to patent the custom. This is a strange approach to folk culture, which is, by definition, collective, unscripted, transmitted orally, and cannot be codified according to modern understandings of patent (Markova 2022, p. 66).

Structure of *nestinarstvo*

The idea and content of *nestinarstvo* ritual is subordinated to the cult of St. Constantine. From a dogmatic point of view, St. Constantine and St. Helen create a single cult, but, in the local context of Strandzha, preference is given to St. Constantine, known locally as St. Kostadin. The culmination of the ritual cycle is the 3rd of June, the day of St. Constantine according to the Julian calendar. The development of the rite highlights elements characteristic of agrarian cultures, with the veneration playing a central role. This ancient solar cult is constructed precisely in the service of a settled agricultural society.

The main ritual persons are the *nestinars*, men and women, but more often women, for the Bulgarian settlements. Since the 1990s, in the village of Bulgari, a *nestinar* is anyone who is “touched⁶ and initiated into the rite”. In the period of the traditional existence of the rite in Bulgaria, only women entered the fire. Among the *nestinars*, the head *nestinarka* (feminine for *nestinar*) is the oldest (past childbearing age), who has been “playing” in the fire the longest and usually has prophetic visions (Georgieva 1987, p. 38). This woman enjoys great authority and is one of the informal leaders of the community. Mikhail Arnaudov also emphasizes this

authority by pointing out that “the *nestinars* not only heal, but also ask for advice in everyday adversities” (Arnaudov 1969, p. 27).

Another ritual person is the *vekilin*, also called *pitrop*, an elderly man who is appointed after confirmation by the head *nestinarka*. He guides the development of the ritual throughout the calendar cycle. He takes care of the sacred springs (*ayazmas*) and maintains the *konaks* (chapels) of St. Constantine and St. Elijah within the village of Bulgari.

The ritual participants include three boys, unmarried, called *lefteri*. They carry the icons of the feast at the head of the ritual procession when the ritual begins. For these boys, participation in the ritual marks a social transition. Carrying the icons can also be seen as going through an ordeal necessary for this social transition (Markova 2022, p. 82).

Nestinar communities form their sacred territory. The central place is occupied by the chapel of the *nestinars*, called *konak*. In the village of Bulgari, it is a single-room building with a hearth. It belongs to the most primitive type of Bulgarian traditional dwelling. The *konaks* in the village of Bulgari have a traditional form and are two: one is dedicated to St. Constantine, the other to St. Elijah. The southern wall of the St. Constantine *konak* has a *stolnina* (niche) where the icons of St. Constantine and St. Helen are placed. On the north wall stands the sacred drum, which sets the rhythm of the solemn procession. The festive vestments (a kind of textile covers) of the icons, also called *rizi* (shirts) or *redve* by the population, are kept in the *konak* (Georgieva 1987, p. 39).

In the sacral territory of Strandzha, the healing springs (*ayazmas*)⁷ have a special place (Georgieva, Stoilov 2013). They are constructed as buildings, called “little monasteries”, with wooden platforms and a fence, aisles, on which the icons are placed during the ritual procession in order “to rest”. The ritual breads brought as a gift are also placed there. Old trees (beech, oak) are also venerated as sacred and it is forbidden to cut them down. When the *ayazmo* (singular for *ayazmas*) is visited for healing, it is obligatory to leave a thread, a piece of clothing or a whole garment, which, according to Ivanicka Georgieva and Krassimir Stoilov, is understood as leaving the illness (Georgieva, Stoilov 2013, p. 476). In their study of the ritual practice, these authors conclude that the piece of clothing is a sacrifice, a substitute for the person, “thought of within the healing process itself” (*ibid.*). A special place among the *ayazmas* in Strandzha is occupied by the Goliamata Ayazma (the Great *ayazma*), also called the Dalechnata *ayazma* (the Far-placed *ayazma*), which is located in the southern part of the mountain, between the villages of Kosti, Gramatikovo and the town of Malko Tarnovo. It is an old sacred place of gathering for descendants and inhabitants of the villages of Kosti, Bulgari, Slivarovo, Gramatikovo and Kondolovo on the Sunday opposite the feast of St. Kostadin. The veneration of the Great Ayazma was interrupted after 1947, when the new ideological framework serving the political doctrine wanted to “purify” the folk culture from all elements that were perceived as

“unreliable and savage”. *Nestinaristvo* also falls into this category and this is one of the reasons for its decline for a prolonged period. During socialism, fire play began to enter tourist establishments for commercial purposes; this was also a way to de-sacralise it in response to new ideological frameworks, reducing it to a simple act of demonstration of human will. On the other hand, the gradual decline of the population in the villages of the region is putting the development of the custom in crisis, insofar as the number of bearers of the cultural reality is decreasing. Despite the apparent depopulation, one of the motives for the revival of the ritual is for the Bulgarian identity, which has fallen into crisis, to find a basis in folk culture.

Ritual actions

The essence of each rite is revealed through ritual actions. They are also a tool for cultural transmission of knowledge (Papuchiev 2016, p. 432). The ritual is conservative and repeatable and, therefore, sustainable.

In *nestinarstvo*, the perception of the ritual state is achieved by falling into a trance. The unpredictable nature of the moment has been pointed out by ritual participants, researchers and ordinary observers alike. P. R. Slaveykov mentions already that, as they danced in the fire with his bare feet, “those touched by St. Constantine, would rip, tear his clothes and jump into the fire, holding in his hand the icon of St. Constantine and St. Helen that they brought from their home”⁸. Mikhail Arnaudov relays the experience of P. P. Slaveykov in the village of Madzhura where the bride of the host with whom he was staying turned pale and broke out in a cold sweat when she heard the bagpipe announcing the fire dance, as she “threw her child in the hands of her father-in-law and jumped into the fire to dance” (Arnaudov 1969, pp. 381 – 382). Arnaudov himself, visiting the village of Urgari/Bulgari in 1932, described the oldest *nestarinka*, Baba Nuna, saying that, on St. Constantine’s day, she was “pale and trembling because she was excited” (Arnaudov 1969, p. 422). The same author shares a conversation with an informant, Petko Nedyalkov, that took place in August 1931. The informant relayed his own observations of the *nestinari*, and, when asked what made them dance in the fire, they replied, “a force comes, chills me, makes me tremble, and makes me enter the fire” (Arnaudov 1969, p. 417). In the accounts and interviews of well-known *nestinari* a similar condition is described. For example, Baba Zlata Daskalova (known as Great Grandmother Zlata) says: “[...] I go crazy, my hands go numb, my legs go numb, they become like wood. I cannot guess what my heart is doing. My head feels strange, I can’t see quite clear [...] when you dance, you dance, it gives you a leave, you feel that the hands and feet get warm, then, you get out of the fire” (Sharankov 1947, p. 29 – 30).

This general and unusual condition of *nestinari* occurring while they anticipate the feast and during the feast itself is expressed in a failure to perform the ordinary duties that are attended by traditional society and are characteristic of it. Theirs is a state of ecstasy during which *nestinari* find themselves as mediators between the

ordinary human community and the world of the supernatural. The divine language is mystical and incomprehensible to the uninitiated (Hasel 1991, p. 49; Tasseva 2010, pp. 411 – 413). The latter can be seen as a form of *glossolalia*, an inherently primal manifestation of the divine language through the mutterings and exclamations of the *nestinari* when they are “touched” and in a state of trance.

One of the culminating moments in the rite is the *nestinari* dance over the embers. As a ceremonial element of ritual or as part of an agrarian cult, dancing over fire is known to other cultures (Danforth 1979). However, it is the context in which the elements are used that is important and gives the ritual system its uniqueness. In his analysis of *nestinarstvo*, Nikos Gusgounis points out that “fire is one of the symbols of heroics, and it is the collective participation that makes the ritual sacred” (Gusgounis 2005, p. 106). This author goes further as he uses the expression of “the temptation by the fire” (*Ibid.*). *Nestinari* enter into the fiery embers as this is accompanied by exclamations “come”, and, according to their own words, the participants in the ritual are definitely in a moment of contact with the saint (St. Constantine). The dance goes on as long as it takes for the embers to die down. During the ritual state, the participants are aided by icons they carry. The fire dance is a climactic moment, but it may not occur if the *nestinari* do not feel prompted (by the saint). A necessary part of the feast, that ascertains the success of the ritual, is a tour of the village territory with a procession.

The presented case of *Nestinarstvo* in Strandzha is specific to the local identity of the local population, insofar as its popularity and fame has grown not only as a result of numerous studies over the years, but especially after its transformation into a tourist attraction and its recognition as part of the UNESCO International List of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Bulgarian example. In this sense, the preservation of the custom, while invariably transforming certain practices, becomes a strategy for preserving the identity of the local population under the condition of depopulation. This is also evidenced by the annual fair organised in the village of Bulgari, which attracts both domestic and foreign tourists. The transformations that are taking place in the picture of *Nestinarstvo* in modern times have as their basis both the decline in population and the disruption of the family heritage of the custom, and the socio-economic processes that are characteristic of the modern era. The historical specificities of the region give the custom its particular shape as an element of the symbolic capital of the local population. The latter, faced with the threat of obliteration and depersonalisation in the absence of social potential, focuses on the symbolic value of what is considered to be the strongest identity marker of the population in the villages of Strandzha listed above.

The case of the chapel St. Ivan Rilski, village of Byala Voda, Strandzha

The chapel St. Ivan Rilski is located in the land of the village of Byala Voda. The village falls administratively in the municipality of Malko Tarnovo, 21 km from the

municipal center. It is located in a small turn-off from the main road and is difficult to find. The road is semi-ruined and suitable for an all-terrain vehicle. A quick check on the internet shows that the village has 45 inhabitants, all of them at retirement age⁹. There are three chapels in the village: The Holy Trinity, an old chapel of St. Petka as well as a newly built one dedicated to the same saint, constructed in a private courtyard in memory of a deceased person, and the village chapel of St. Ivan Rilski which will be presented here. Its case is used to illustrate the thesis of the construction of symbolic capital without the presence of a social one.

The chapel dedicated to St. Ivan Rilski was chosen for this presentation because the legends of its construction combine several parallel narratives¹⁰. According to the first narrative, a prophetic dream indicated to the late Dimitar Karpichev from the town of Burgas, the place where the chapel should be built in memory of the massacred Bogomils. In the dream, the man was told that the place corresponds exactly to the one of the massacres of nearly 70,000 Bogomils as those were gathered from all over Europe and brought across the Black Sea through an underground tunnel¹¹. The words of the most popular Bulgarian prophetess of the twentieth century, Vanga, also play a role in the legendary story. According to her, rivers of blood flowed in the ravine where the chapel stands today. Contemporary clairvoyants say that they saw severed heads and human limbs and also that they heard screams and moans. Dimitar Karpichev also dreamed of hundreds of candles and saw them burning out and then self-igniting again. He accurately describes the place he dreamt of, the area of Marino Settlement, near the village of Byala Voda. Upon visiting the place and lighting candles there, his dream recurred. Subsequently, Vanga¹² confirmed that this is precisely the place and named businessmen who should provide money for the construction of the chapel. These events took place in 1996.

A peasant from the village of Byala Voda was also told in a prophetic dream the exact location of the chapel, with a particular orientation of the apse to the southeast. The latter suggests that the construction of the chapel does not follow orthodox requirements. This is associated implicitly with a deviation from the official dogma of Bogomil doctrine. As a result, a concern arose among the builders of the chapel, whether the building would be consecrated. Still, Vanga insisted on the instructions and a priest was sent from the neighbouring town of Tsarevo to consecrate the chapel, following orders of the bishop of Sliven, Ioanikiy.

Online sources widely circulate a story relating that, in his dream, the villager from Byala Voda saw an apparition of St. Petka. This saint occupies a specific place in Bulgarian contemporary and traditional religiosity, as she is one of the most beloved saints throughout the Bulgarian ethnic territory and bears the epithet Tarnovska (for more on the saint's name, see Valchinova 1999, pp. 52 – 56). In popular ideas, St. Petka is associated with St. Nedelya, as the two saints are believed to be sisters and thus share a common kinship. The saint's feast is often celebrated as a family one, and the popular cult associates her with the serpent-protector of homes and patron of the clan (Popov 1991, p. 133). The saint's biography is examined in detail by G. Valchinova and we will not dwell on it fur-

ther. Valchinova also draws attention to the fact that the cult of Sv. Petka, as well as the cult of Virgin Mary and several other male saints, show a combination of different elements and dimensions (Valchinova 1999, p. 59). The cult of St. Petka shows a connection with local and regional identity and, in particular, with the “Christian”, respectively “Bulgarian” identity of the population. This function of the saints and, particularly, of St. Petka has already been pointed out by G. Valchinova (Ibid., p. 62). On the other hand, the saint is often present in the dreams of healers who recognize her as the woman who guided them in their gift of becoming healers. In numerous cases, she is also their patroness and healers always possess icons of St. Petka. They are themselves on the border between the religious and the magical (see Kotseva 2018 for more on this subject). In this sense, it seems logical that St. Petka is venerated as the patroness of the Bogomils as well. The saint was also strongly venerated by Vanga, who considered that St. Petka was her patroness. Vanga donated the money collected from the people for the construction of a church named after the saint and built in Mt. Rupite, where the prophetess spent the last years of her life.

The story continues with a tactical decision: in order to be more easily recognized by the church, the chapel was not named after St. Petka, but after St. Ivan Rilski, who was also venerated as a healer but was not as symbolically charged as St. Petka.

Today, the site of Marino is a valley with a dry river. There are visible traces of people visiting and lighting candles in memory of the *fallen Bogomils*. A visit to the site, tied to the mystique of the legend, is now part of the tourist routes around Strandzha¹³. The tour guides repeat the site’s story painting an image of the mystical mountain. External visitors initiate the whole process. The mountain itself, as mentioned above, is undergoing a very strong depopulation, there is almost no population left. The village of Byala Voda is challenging to find on a map; there are few inhabitants left, there is no shop, and the necessities, such as bread, are delivered several times a week. The chapel remains locked, under the pretext of keeping out refugees¹⁴, but all observations from the field show that there are no people to visit and to serve it. It only draws outside visitors. It thus appears that the symbolic capital of the chapel is built not from the social capital of the local community, as there is none, but from outside. All the syncretic elements in the narrative related to the chapel correspond to the mystical religiosity that contemporary Bulgarians seem to need, as it includes a mystery, prophetic dreams, a saint, the Bulgarian identity and Vanga. This religious syncretism can be easily detected in the semi-orthodox orientation of the chapel along the directions of the world, but also in its interior, where icons of St. Ivan Rilski are placed together with pictures of Vanga.

Conclusion

Based on two examples, that of *nestinarstvo* and that of the Chapel of St. Ivan Rilski, the paper traces the process of modernization and renewal of folk culture and all its components, while highlighting the transformation of the custom ritual complex of *nestinarstvo* and the syncretic image of local religiosity.

Considering ritual systems, it is essential to emphasize that the transition from traditional to modern society also requires a change in value codes. Awareness of contemporary society forms a different attitude to both folk culture and to specific religious notions. The cultural frameworks of postmodern society require a redefinition of the established relationship with folk culture. The elements of cultural identity in modern and postmodern society, include, of course, folk culture, but they also presuppose a different understanding of it. The strict internal differentiation and regulation of folk culture is not obligatory for modern people. The proposed empirical framework of ritual from the Strandzha region shows that its functioning in modern-day Bulgaria combines rituality and “festivity” in an intense way. Festivity is an important element of communication in a community undergoing a demographic crisis. In such a community, functioning of ritual is linked to migration only within the duration of the ritual marked by a festival.

Festivity broadens the range of participants, as all those willing to participate are eligible to do so. It is the massive, general accessibility that characterizes the liberalism of festivity as a cultural category (Markova 2022, p. 115). Festivity is not limited to processing and interpenetrating actions. It is a cultural interpretation open to all participants, whereas ritual is a closed hierarchic system. This new reality reflects the mixing of cultural categories in a region exposed to the impact of a demographic crisis, as well as to the intervention of the state which implements its idea of popular culture.

Cultural identity of modern man is once again put to the test, as it is constructed reflexively, often through opposing cultural strategies. One element of it is the presence of folk culture as an obligatory point of view in the act of self-discovery. The other is the dynamization of religious practice and expertise so that this identity responds to the need for mysticism and mystery. While *nestinarstvo* in Strandzha is associated with a specific religious experience, religious syncretism adds touches of mysticism to its image. We are witnessing a complete renewal of the cultural system. This process is not just an act of modernisation but a strategy to rehabilitate the image of the region as a frontier, a depopulated and backwards area.

The demographic outflow puts the region in crisis. Folk culture and religious practice, accompanied by legendary tales of mysticism and mystery, are compensatory mechanisms that help to rehabilitate it. They also become the basis for a new tourist strategy.

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NOTES

1. Most of the northern part of Strandzha mountain, which is also the subject of the field studies, is located on the territory of Bulgaria. The area is bordered and was inaccessible for many years, which led large part of the rural population of Strandzha to leave their native settlements. From the mid-20th century, this population intensively sought livelihood either in the towns and villages on the southern Black Sea coast or in the regional center of Burgas. As a result, at the time of this study, most of the villages in Strandzha are in a state of decay, depopulated, seemingly immobile and dead. The region is gradually becoming an attractive destination for many people of retirement and pre-retirement age, including foreign citizens who are buying houses, but this does not affect the general appearance of the villages. Most of the new owners do not occupy their houses all year round and use them only during the summer season when there is more activity in the region. At the beginning of the 21st century, there is no trace of the economic, social and demographic boom described in the sources related to what the settlements in Strandzha experienced in the second half of the nineteenth century (Kotseva 2022, pp. 35 – 36).
2. Census year: 1926 – 501 w.; 1934 – 588 w.; 1946 – 655 w.; 1956 – 795 w.; 1975 – 500 w.; 1985 – 319 w.; 1992 – 241 w.; 2001 – 161 w.; 2011 – 68 w.; 2021 – 39 w.; 2023 – 33 w.
3. The Bulgarian scientist Mikhail Arnaudov visited the villages where *nestinarstvo* was performed for the first time in 1914. He points out Vasiliko, Ahtopol, Kostî, Brodilovo, Bulgari (Urgari) and Marzevo (see Arnaudov 1969, pp. 410 – 504).
4. The custom can be observed in the villages of Kerkini, Mavrolevki, Langada, Agia Eleni, Meliki.
5. Arnaudov 1969; Georgieva 1987, pp. 37 – 51; Georgieva 1999, pp. 161 – 170.; Georgieva 2003, pp. 9 – 29; Angelova 1955; Fol 2000; Danforth 1989; Danforth 1984, pp. 53 – 85.
6. Touched, or, literally, “interecepted”, is a type of ritual state similar to falling into a trance.
7. This part of the article, dedicated to the sacred topography, draws attention to the ayazms on the territory of Strandzha.
8. Slaveykov 1866, p. 195. The same is confirmed by Arnaudov 1969, p. 381.
9. [https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B0_%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0_\(%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82_%D0%91%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%81\)](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B0_%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0_(%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82_%D0%91%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%81)).
10. The exposition in this part follows a publication in an online media – <https://www.flagman.bg/article/225531>.
11. Historians are skeptical of these accounts.
12. A Bulgarian prophetess who gained popularity with her numerous predictions (for more on Vanga, see Valcinova 1999).

13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfZpe4XuDHA>.
14. The mountain borders the Republic of Turkey and is one of the main routes for refugees from the Middle East.

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