

Bulgarian identity and folklore

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



The tapestry of a Bulgarian's life is interwoven with the country's rich and colorful folklore, songs and dances, varied festivals and witty proverbs. The folkculture which has been preserved through the centuries is an intrinsic part of a Bulgarian's daily activities. The spirit and identity of a Bulgarian is entwined with the folk traditions and customs, as it influences and shapes his way of thinking.

Also, a history of suffering under the Ottoman rule and coming through it with their identity intact, adds a special dimension to the people of Bulgaria, packing power to the motto "unity makes strength." The courage that the peasant community displayed in clinging to their cultural identity, under the "Turkish yoke," united them to fight for their freedom. The determination that they displayed in preserving their identity under extremely oppressive conditions, tells us why the modern Bulgarian army never lost a flag.

This essay will first learn what "identity" means to a Bulgarian and then move on to study the historical facts that shaped the Bulgarian identity as it is today. It will explore how Bulgarian identity has survived over the centuries and how the folklore traditions in its entirety, bonds Bulgarians scattered all over the world to their motherland. This essay will also provide a glimpse into the Bulgarian folk culture including festivals, rituals, proverbs mythology and music, which have kept the Bulgarian identity and spirit alive round the world even today.

Shaping the identity In 19th century Eastern Europe, the emerging nation-states depended on their peasant traditions, which had survived foreign invasion and dominance, to form an definite idea of what they stood for. According to Herder, every nation is an organic entity with its own native

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cultural institutions and pure spirit which are best reflected in the folkpoetryof the peasants. If a nation is to seek political sovereignty, it must find its pure spirit and build its future on the cultural traditions of the past.

The native peasants were thus viewed as the soul of the nation, and folklore their legitimate expression. For the people of Bulgaria, their folk culture was also a weapon, which they used as an inspiration to unite and fight for their freedom. The Haidouk folk songs - about the heroes who hid in the mountains and formed a band of guerilla fighters - influenced the people of Bulgaria to join the bands and fight against the oppression of the turks, which tells us how powerful folklore is.

Today, folk culture in Bulgaria is carefully preserved and taken forward with government-sponsorship, through various organizations and festivals. The government understands that folk culture, with its vital music and traditions, is what keeps Bulgarians together, no matter where they are. For the Bulgarian community, the traditions will always remain a part of life. The beliefs, knowledge, traditions and value system still plays a major part in social and cultural interaction.

This explains why ethnic discourse is so often “ objectified” in folk culture events in Bulgaria, and why folk texts of various kinds are so widely used in it. In fact everyday life is dominated by the folklore traditions because they are regarded as a system of values, norms, texts, patterns and technologies. According to William R Bascom, ethnomusicologist, folklore serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political and economic institutions and plays an important role as an educative device in its transmission from one generation to another.

He therefore suggests that folklore must be examined in better detail and care, because it gives us a clearer picture of the facts that shapes the destiny of a culture. Through the oral traditions of folklore, hundreds of songs, legends, rituals and tales are handed down to the present. Traditions that go back to Slavic antiquity are still alive today, for example, the ritual sharing of sweetened wheat to commemorate the death of a loved one, forty days after his decease.

Another tradition, this one peculiar to the Bulgarians, is the exchange of "martenici." According to which, the year begins on March first (mart is Bulgarian for March). As part of the tradition, a red string, is attached to children's wrists as well as animals' necks and tails - to combat evil. This is one of the most popular custom among Bulgarians world-wide. On this day a string is offered to each member of the family and to all of one's friends, in order to bring them health and happiness throughout the year.

Another unique aspect of Bulgaria which differentiates it from the rest of the world is its special voice. It is said that there is nothing in this world to match the Bulgarian voice, which is why a Bulgarian folk song performed by Valya Balkanska was recorded on a gold CD and sent aboard the Voyager to be the earth's ambassador in alien worlds. Bulgarian folksongs too are singular in nature.

There might be a folk song for every occasion from field work to harvest, from birth to a funeral, for any stage of life that you can think of, but they are not repetitive and Bulgarian music remains exceptional. The folk songs and the dances afford a rich background for the understanding of the spirit,

that kept alive, the spark of national feeling for over five hundred years under foreign occupation.

The unconscious pictures that people create of themselves are more authentic and more accurate than any other source that we can secure and the Bulgarian peasant through the medium of folklore has painted a picture of what he considers important. Folklore customs aside, in Bulgaria the official historic pillars of identity are three, chosen by the government, for their various positive and shining qualities. First of all the Protobulgarians - warriors, who defeated the superpower Byzantium and established a state on its land in the 7th century.

Secondly the Slavs - industrious, egalitarian, freedom-loving people, useful in times of pro-Russian orientation and finally the Thracian ancestors - ancient, wise, peaceful. It was the Thracians who contributed the Kukeri traditions and the ever-popular day of Baba Marta. The Slavs are said to have created the traditional circular Bulgarian folk dances and the lucky number three. Without knowing it, these centuries-old civilizations worked together to create a modern culture for their descendants.

Today, Bulgarians consider both the Slavs and the Thracians to be their ancestors. However, history proves that the more primitive Thracians were here first. If we look into the symbols that can be associated with the Bulgarian identity, the Balkan mountains and the Balkan lion stand out, both for obvious reasons. The Balkans appear as symbols of shelter in many folk songs for the haidouks, the venerated resistance-fighters, who in turn were the symbol of Bulgaria's urge for national liberty.

The "Balkan lion" as the epitome of Bulgaria's victorious spirit too appeared in the first national hymn of the country, composed by Nikola Zhivkov. Despite decades of oppression or maybe because of it, the Bulgarians have an identity that is rich and vital. The concept of this identity stands on the stable foundation of a folk culture which incorporates strength, humor, wisdom, music as well as a unique and varied mythology.

But, there is another school of thought which begs to differ in the matter of Balkan stability and provides a different point of view. Always traumatic and unstable, Balkan reality invites discourses of domination. Within this asymmetrical system of antagonisms and co-operation, stereotypes of Balkan character emerge as identities. It is said that the Balkan identity has been a potent channeling tool in the cultural exorcism of civilized Europe.

The challenge for Balkan scholars, though they desire a modern non-ethnic identity, is to resist the lure of globalization. But, since the Balkan countries lack what it takes, the region's best resistance to globalization is to foster an alliance of cultural critics across ethnic and professional lines. A window to the Bulgarian history History tells us that the Bulgarians are Asiatic in origin. Kinsmen of the Huns and Avars whose earlier raids had greatly disturbed the peace-loving Slavs.

The Bulgarians were the first Asiatic people who established a permanent home in Balkania. They effected the conquest of the Slavs, but in the course of about two centuries were absorbed by the more numerous race, and largely lost their identity. Inter-marriage and mixture of blood modified the physical type of the Bulgars. They lost their language and were converted to

the same type of Greek Orthodox Christianity as the Slavs. They adopted the same Cyrillic alphabet and became thoroughly Slavized.

Nothing but the name Bulgarian remains to associate them with their Asiatic forebears. In the tenth century, Bulgaria came under the direct control of Byzantium, but recovered its independence in 1197 after a long struggle. The Bulgarian ruler at the time, Kalojan, set the seal on this victory in 1204 by having himself crowned the King of Bulgaria by a papal envoy. The second Bulgarian state thus inaugurated lasted until the Ottoman conquest, which took place in 1393. After that, the country ceased

to exist as a separate entity until the nineteenth century. Whatever Bulgarian culture survived through this period did so ' behind the protective walls of monasteries. ' Turkish rule lasted five centuries and is viewed by Bulgarian scholars as " the darkest period in the history of the Bulgarian people. " The Bulgarians were the last of the Balkan peninsula to attain their liberation. Perhaps because of the proximity to Constantinople, the hand of the Turk was felt more heavily in Bulgaria than elsewhere.

The only thing that continued was the village system in which the peasants were allowed to handle their own affairs. Oppressive, too, was the domination of the Phanariote clergy. This was even worse than the civil oppression of the Turks, because the clergy pursued a systematic policy of obliterating all evidences of Bulgarian culture and literature. In 1825, Illarion, the Greek Metropolitan of Tirnovo, made a bonfire of the old library of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, which till then had survived all the vicissitudes of the Turkish era.

So thoroughly was this accomplished that the Bulgarians had actually passed out of the consciousness of Europe till the beginning of the nineteenth century. Bulgarian schools were closed, manuscripts were destroyed, and with the extinction of the Bulgarian archbishopric of Ochrida, the last stronghold of the old national Church, to which the Bulgarians had clung tenaciously, disappeared. It seemed that nothing could save the Bulgarians from complete Hellenization.

Early in the nineteenth century, however, signs of a literary and cultural renaissance, the invariable prelude to a revival of nationalism, began to appear in Bulgaria. From the study of their past, the Bulgarians discovered their true identity and then went on to fight for it. Bulgaria's chequered history, the points where it differs from the rest of the Europe and the fact that it serves to protect Europe from the imminent Islamic invasion also shapes its identity.

Bulgarian historians, who also serve as national ideologists, always point out that it shields and protects Europe - a role that Europe is expected to understand and appreciate. Also the point here is to prove that Bulgaria was a cradle of European culture and that its history is intrinsically connected with Europe's development. Interestingly enough, at the same time historians take pride in matters that actually separate Bulgaria from the West European cultural tradition - the fact that it adopted the Cyrillic alphabet, and did not accept Roman Catholicism.

The history of the country, which was conquered by the Turks in 1396, but managed to preserve its specific Slavic cultural and national identity throughout the five centuries, until 1878, when its European identity re-

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emerged, is stressed repeatedly. Folk culture In the field of culture, a long hard battle had to be waged against the Greeks, who by reason of their domination of the Church, gained a stranglehold on Bulgarian culture and even on the Bulgarian language.

There was thus very little cultural advance until the end of eighteenth century, and it is small wonder that until recently Bulgaria was regarded as a very backward country. After the collapse of the Bulgarian Empire and its subsequent absorption into the Ottoman lands, the cultural level of Bulgaria reached an impasse. But soon a striking development of folk songs was noticed throughout the region. In the western part of the country these were largely epic, connected with the Serb epic cycles.

These songs have a greater connection with the historical events that they purport to recount. The songs of the western region were less poetic, sober and realistic. In the east, however lyrical songs predominated. It was in such a condition, where traces of the popular language were slowly making their way into the written forms of Church Slavonic, that modern literature came into being and inspired national resurgence. Bulgarian folklore, mythology and festivals Bulgarian folklore exhibits a certain duality in nature.

On the one hand, folklore is displayed as a spiritual expression of an agrarian type of society, where the central point is to recreate the annual farming cycle and the human life cycle in a tradition, based on folklore ritualism. On the other hand, it is permeated by the historical time of the Bulgarians. The interpretation of this time has found its most imposing expression in the Bulgarian heroic epic, similar to the epical sagas of other cultures.

Furthermore, mythology too pops out from every nook and cranny in Bulgaria, in seemingly unlikeliest of places. Bulgarian mythology, with its vampires and goblins, samodivi and dragons, endless tales with fantastic plots, for example in - A Lad Outruns the Sun, A Maiden Outshines the Sun - makes the Bulgarian culture such a rich and interesting one. It is amazing the way in which the Bulgarian folklore, mythology and festivals along with dance, music and assorted rituals come together in a holistic manner.

They connect the spiritual growth of the Bulgarians with the cultural traditions of the other Balkan nations, irrespective of their religious identification and independent ethnic history. It could be said that when all these three elements come together, it reveals, a profound relationship with the Bulgarian daily experience and historical destiny. Somewhere the smaller events of life fall together in harmony to make the big picture.

Among rituals and ceremonies, marriage and the continuity of the community is arguably the most important theme in the Bulgarian calendar, along with farm-related rituals. All festivals stress on these two points one way or the other. The most popular marriage-related ritual is the contrasting mid-winter and spring-time ceremonies for males and females respectively. For example, unmarried young lads, on 24 December, after midnight, visit each and every house, forming bands called 'koledari or survakari' and sing songs with an intricate mythical content.

Similarly in the springtime, the maidens form ritual groups of girls, known as lazarki, perform a specific repertory full of tragic themes. In this context, the Bulgarian masquerade ritualism is very rich. The lazarki and koledari rituals are female and male life cycle initiations respectively. They prepare the

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males and females for the stage of matrimony. To elaborate on the theme, let us list a few festivals and rituals that allows us a glimpse into the two big wheels of folk life - life and farm cycle.

The festivals in Bulgaria are innumerable and definitely merit a section of their own. According to ethnographers, the overall number of Bulgarian festive rites exceeds 11, 000 - a plentitude of customs accompanying Bulgarian people's lives from the cradle to the grave. Here are a few popular festivals celebrated in Bulgaria. The Martenitsa Tradition - Baba Marta, Grandma Marta This is by far the most popular festival of Bulgarians and is celebrated world-wide by Bulgarians. This is a unique Bulgarian custom which originates from the ancient Thracians.

The earliest martenitsas were made of white and red woolen threads to which a silver or gold coin was occasionally tied. Other rituals observed on March 1 include women dressing all over in red and in North-eastern Bulgaria, the lady of the house would toss a red cloth over a fruit tree or spread red wool onto a field to secure fertility. In stock-breeding areas, a white-and-red thread was commonly tied to the livestock. The tradition is still alive and widely respected.

Every year on March 1, Bulgarians all over the world present each other with martenitsas, thus introducing and spreading this very Bulgarian custom, to a broader canvas of people. New year celebrations The most colorful set of winter calendar customs is that of New Year's celebration. From time immemorial, the fireplace and the table spread have been symbols of generosity and abundance. The richer the spread, the more fruitful the coming year is expected to be. It is a custom observed nation-wide.

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The koledari would go from house to house singing carols and wishing health and prosperity to the family. The koledari's dress and costume ornaments differ from region to region. This custom is characterized by extremely colorful rituality involving songs, blessings, and dances. The koledari perform on Christmas Eve as well. Having to do with the Julian and the Gregorian calendar, the customs have preserved their original vitality and are related to the anticipation of fertility. Ladouvane or Singing to Rings

This is another New Year's custom, expressing an young girls' eagerness to get married and enjoy a happy family life. Ladouvane or koumichene is a maidens' rite performed on the day before New Year only in the areas of Western Bulgaria, Central Balkan Range and in some regions along the Danube River. In the rest of the country, it is celebrated on Midsummer's Day. Koukeri - the mummers tradition Koukerovden marks the beginning of the spring calendar. Everybody makes his own mask competing to show greater personal skill and craftsmanship.

Therefore, no two ritual masks are alike and the men take great pride in displaying their masks. Young men in masks, visit houses and distribute gifts as part of the tradition. Todorovden - St Theodore's Day St Theodore's Day is celebrated six days after Shrovetide. It is also known as "Horses' Easter" because of the horse races commonly held on that day. According to folk tradition, newly married women would make a ritual Theodore's round loaf of bread decorated with a dough-modelled image of a horse's head.

The ancient roots of this folk festival lie in Thracian mythology. The horse is a sun symbol, while the horseman is known in the Bulgarian lands through the cult of the Thracian Horseman. Trypon Zarezan - Vinegrower's Day Trypon

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Zarezan is celebrated during the first half of February. It is an old occupation-related custom. On this day, observed throughout the country, the vines are pruned and sprinkled with wine. In some areas, a Vine King is chosen and he is crowned with a wreath of wine twigs.

Blagovets - Annunciation Day The festival of Blagovets, celebrated on March 25, symbolizes the beginning of spring - swallows returning from the southern lands. Popular Christian mythology associates the day with the story of Virgin Mary sitting in the garden and sewing, then leaning and smelling a sprig of basil and thus getting pregnant. Being an ancient festival, Blagovets is laden with old-time rites shrouded in popular Christianity. Easter is the most revered festival in the Church calendar of Orthodox Christians.

Making Easter cakes was introduced in Bulgaria as late as the 1920's, but nowadays it has a very important place in the Bulgarian people's customs. Typical of the festival is the dying of eggs, a custom much enjoyed by all. St George's Day St George's Day is among the most important folk festivals. It is observed on May 6 and marks the beginning of trading activity and stock-breeding for the year. Its expressive rituality has been preserved to date.

On the night before St George's Day, young boys would pick blossoming willow twigs to decorate the house, the pens, and the livestock for health. During the night, the sheep were turned out to feed because that night's dew on the grass is believed to have a curative powers. Bulgaria could easily be called the land of festivals, with almost every other day in the calendar being a festival of sorts. But it is the very same festivals, in all their abundance and glory, which prove to be at the core of the Bulgarian identity.

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Festivals are as a rule, a time when people socialize and bond, thus the plentiful festivals may explain the strong ties that Bulgarians world-wide share with their motherland. Story telling in Bulgarian culture Humor mixed with huge dollops of wit and a fine appreciation for life is what endears the native Bulgarian story-telling to the world. Bulgaria's Nasreddin Hodja is a name everybody recognizes. This witty character is always getting the better of his rival comical character Hitar Petar.

In fact Hodja can be termed the classic Bulgarian who endures hardship with loads of humor, wit and resourcefulness. As regards story-telling, the Bulgarian folk tale is characterized by its interest in the magical, its commitment with various everyday life events, confronting the rich and the poor, the clever and the fool, as well as by its abundance of candid and natural humor. The Bulgarian has a feeling for the legendary, most often associated with an old-testament imagery, and a live sense of historical narrative.

Storytelling in Bulgaria is particularly enticing because the folklore memory travels into the realm of magical creatures, buried treasures, heroes who save the world, vampires, angels and healing spells...all fantastic and captivating. It also reminds us of the remote roots of the Bulgarian folk culture. Chase two rabbits and you catch none... Classic proverbs like this one are as much a part of the everyday experience of the Bulgarian peasant as are his folk verse, song and tale.

The proverb plays a more important role in the life of the Bulgarian than it does in the peasant civilizations of other European countries. As witnessed in many other cultures of the world, the proverb is a focal point in conversation,

argument or rhetoric. It is widely used to express compactly an idea or to create a mental image. It is a true mirror on the inner life of the people, of the conditions which prevail in their lives, of their morals and of their manners.

Many Bulgarian proverbs are crudely expressed, internal evidence that they stem from the folk and are thus authentic. The proverbs also help in understanding the psyche of the man who uses a particular proverb. Here is a good one – An idle man makes a good prophet. Bulgarian music, folk songs and theater A Bulgarian can never be separated from his music. A character shared by the rest of the world you could say, but it is not all who share the fine appreciation for music that Bulgarians instinctively have.

For a Bulgarian, life is a musical, with all its accompaniment. For him there is no plateau in life - joy, sorrow, loneliness or death that exists without music and suitable lyrics. Internationally, the Bulgarian music fascinates both the general public and the experts. At the turn of the century, the Bulgarian folklore tradition was given some new impulses, mainly in Macedonia and Thrace. Influenced by the revolutionary reality, a considerable number of songs were created.

The musical expression of this cultural system has its regional and general characteristics for example, the Rhodope song, Thracian song, Shopp song, Macedonian song, among others. But the specific Bulgarian two-voice songs, and the phenomenon of irregular beats are unique. Regional variations are not strictly delineated, but certain typical characteristics have formed several musical dialects: North-Bulgarian, Dobroudjanian, Thracian, Shopp, the Pirin Mountains area, the Sredna Gora region, and Rhodopian.

The distinguishing features of the Bulgarian folk song can be traced along three lines – homophonic, rhythm and vocal wealth. Today the Bulgarian folk tradition is revived in the context of the specific new phenomena in music, where various styles and forms of genre meet as is witnessed in all parts of the world, in almost all cultures. In Bulgaria at the same time, there is a growing presence of performers coming from different ethnic groups, chiefly Gypsies, whose musical art has been exerting its influence on the Bulgarian folklore for a good while.

What makes the Bulgarian folk song special is its rhythm and vocal wealth. They are of a caliber described by the experts as ranging from fantastic richness to primitive monotony. The extended time inherent in the folksongs are its distinguishing feature, as it is non-existent in the rest of the European music. Theater too is part of the Bulgarian love for expression. Once Bulgaria was free, its natural aptitude and love for music, drama, song and dance came to the fore.

It is a fact that the musical theater in its informal form has always played a major role in Bulgarian culture. But after independence, classical operettas, revues, vaudeville, children's plays, and modern musical comedies flourished under the indulgent eyes of the Bulgarians. In a deliberate move to bring professionals together to explore this genre, the government established the State Musical Theater in 1948. The Bulgarian involvement with operetta, goes back to about seventy-five years.

The State Musical Theater is the heir to a tradition that reached its high point during the 1930s. At that same time, private ensembles such as the Free Theater of the Renaissance, the Cooperative Theater, and the Odeon

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performed numerous works for enthusiastic audiences. An impressive standard was established which is appreciated all over the world today. The Bulgarian talent in the area of music, voice and opera is legendary, with people flocking to enjoy what the masters have in store for them.

Bulgarians Abroad While there were no Bulgarian political institutions during the Ottoman era, the Bulgarian culture and language were well preserved as a result of Ottoman policy, which made no real attempt at cultural, religious, or linguistic assimilation. Gradually, both the formation of crafts guilds called *esnafs*, whose members underwrote the promotion of Bulgarian culture, and through the medium of education, Bulgarian cultural and ethnic consciousness spread.

By the 1870s, there were thousands of Bulgarians living outside of their homeland in such places as Vienna, Bucharest, Odessa, Bessarabia and Constantinople and were to be a major influence on the Bulgarian Revival. The interest toward Bulgarian folk songs and dance has been sustained in the past two decades by a number of highly professional and amateur groups - American, Japanese, Dutch, Danish, among others and has culminated in the success of the Swiss recording of " *Le mystere des voix bulgares*," followed by a worldwide tour of the Bulgarian vocal ensemble.

The craving for Bulgarian folklore in the West is a basically urban phenomenon. For the foreigners, the representations of Bulgarian folklore music - the sound icon of Bulgarians is a fascinating one. During the 1970s, interest in Bulgarian female polyphony exploded in the wake of the American folk revival and the women's liberation movement.

Groups began springing up all over, at colleges and community centers, often incorporating dance as well as singing. Although in the early years, instructors were mostly Americans, in the past decade, since the fall of the Bulgarian communist government in 1989, more and more Bulgarian instructors have been able to come to the United States to teach vocal and instrumental skills. Bulgarian folk songs and performers are liked and praised ar