

“SOCIALY ALIEN WOMEN” IN BULGARIAN PEASANT COMMUNITIES, LATE 19TH TO MID 20TH CENTURIES

by

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The village, in its stability, expresses much of the history of human knowledge. In its functions we can see the processes whereby nature has been controlled and domesticated. The village's borders, its toponymy and inner organisation, express in physical terms a basic human order and view of the world.

In Bulgaria, a living space exploited for countless generations, people have adjusted their labour, knowledge, calendar and customs to the characteristics of the land, and so created their own culture. Within this process the Bulgarian village has a special role. Up to the middle of the 20th century the majority of Bulgarians were peasants, and it was in the peasant environment that ethnic and cultural identity was formed. Over the ages, it was the village that transmitted the codes of cultural memory, which, along with modern ideas, have formed current mentalities.

The philosophical system of the Bulgarian village is a specific mix of Christian and pre-Christian complexes and notions. One of the most important is that of the social order, the basic stable form for secure interaction between man, nature and society. In the village, personality survives through the collective body. The formation of a person like other people is one of the most important tasks of peasant society: according to the established norms and laws in the village community, only this person is fit for group life.

In the traditionally established stages of the life cycle everyone becomes part of the social structures, gradually and inevitably. They accept the work and the material and moral values of the community. Only then can they be given a

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definite social role and responsibilities, and take their place in the community hierarchy. The social organisation of the village is defined by the categories 'our' and 'alien': 'our' world is the community, organised according to a stable model which defines peasant life – family, social institutions, human activity etc. By socialisation individuals participate in the formation of this model, at the same time receiving protection against the 'alien' – the world of the unknown, of destruction and chaos.

It is in this philosophical context that we find certain women who have been allotted a peculiar status, making them to some extent 'aliens'. The term 'alien' is elastic: it signals the individual who is unlike others, and reflects the defensive reaction of the community against those who could threaten the established order.

One practice showing a woman as different from others is the **bride from another village**. Endogamy is one of the most essential elements in the formation of individual and community life, and when a girl leaves her home village to marry elsewhere, it is a personal drama. Her feelings are illustrated in a popular song:

There is a willow, there isn't a willow
 My mother had me
 But better she never had me
 For she has given me far away
 Far away, across three villages

Obviously here the problem is not the girl's personal choice, nor is it simply a matter of obeying her mother. Up till the 1930s there was a popular belief that a girl's leaving her village would cause a lengthy and disastrous drought there. Why then does a girl leave?, or rather, which girls have the right to leave? Up till the mid 20th century it was said that "the most and the least beautiful marry away"¹ – in other words, women who are not like others. The belief was that such women could not be given a place in the community, and so threatened established structures.

On the other hand there are some characteristics of the bride from another village that make her nearer the status of female demigods. Very beautiful girls are seen as a kind of half-sisters of the revered wood-nymphs and elves. The names of several Bulgarian villages reflect these popular beliefs. For example, in Cherni Osam, in the central Stara Planina mountain area, there is a region called Momina Mogila – Maiden's Hill. An old legend recounts that a very beautiful girl had once lived there, who had enticed shepherds into the woods and killed them.

¹ Author's information from the central Stara Planina mountain region.

Also, at the foot of Maragidik peak there is a place known as Rusalskata Pateka – Elf’s Way, where, it is said, wood-nymphs come at Whitsun in the form of beautiful maidens.

Connected with this notional weird power of the woman who is different is the popular practice of ‘immuring’ a bride’s shadow in the foundations of a house or bridge. Here we see the reverse of the process above – the conversion into ‘alien’ for the benefit of the community.

Another woman with ‘alien’ status in the group order is the **childless woman**. A woman’s reproductive role is one of the most important marks of her social status, a qualification giving her the right to participate in the life of the village community. The childless woman on the other hand is commonly seen as an evil for home and village, her ailment being potentially transferable to the earth, to animals or to other people². According to Dimitar Marinov, an early twentieth century ethnographer, the whole village attacks the childless woman, using contemptuous terms such as *jalovitza* or *stiritza*, barren³. She has no right to become a sponsor or a godmother; to meet her on the first day of sowing is bad luck. Her social status is incomplete, which is a danger to the whole village community, so the other members take extra precautions against her. Usually this has no personal motivation: the peasant community never confuses social isolation with the individual personality. The childless woman is isolated from traditional customs and relations, but at the same time her personal problem meets with some sympathy. On the other hand, her husband has the right to a divorce on account of her infertility: in a village in Cherni Osam region between 1939 and 1944, 5 divorces were granted for this reason.

From society’s point of view giving birth to a child is a required condition for social maturity. It is only after a child is born in a family that the parents gain certain rights and responsibilities: not having children means that family members cannot go through the traditionally established stages of social recognition. It is not only the childless woman who is prohibited from being a godparent, sponsor and grandparent – her husband shares this isolation and is similarly barred from these roles, as well as from his ritual duty as the father-in-law at a traditional wedding.

Therefore, although child-bearing is popularly believed to be in the hands of God, infertile women must nevertheless receive treatment⁴, usually from a woman healer. Many common practices ritually repeat the act of conception. For example,

² Vodenicharov, A. Rodilnata obrednost na balgarite kato forma na socializacija. In: *Ethnographic problems of the traditional spirit culture*, vol. 2, Sofia, 1994, p. 107-108.

³ Marinov, D. *Narodna vjara i religiozni narodni obichai*. Sofia 1994, p. 234.

⁴ Vodenicharova, A. Obichai i obredi svarzani s bremennostta, ragdaneto i rannata socializacija na deteto. In: *Lovech region*, Sofia 2000, p. 354.

in the Trojan region of central Bulgaria, the healer gives the woman tea made from the herb *lonicera caprifoleum*, which she must drink under a plum tree which has produced fruit for the first time. In the same region, some old women still remember a treatment involving drinking a hundred or more raw eggs. An interesting practice is the custom called *Jalova Ponuda*, recorded in Gostilniza, a village in the Gabrovo region of central Bulgaria⁵. Here, on 15th February, the village midwife or 'grandmother' takes a loaf of rye bread, put some glowing embers and the herb calamint balm on it, and waves this 'incense' under the skirts of childless women, to drive away the devil and enable the women to conceive.

Usually infertility is attributed to a disease of the wife, but in some villages in the region both partners are treated. However, male sterility is seen as temporary, caused by evil magic and lasting until the magic spell is broken, whereas in a woman it is thought to be a punishment for mortal sins, so that she brings disgrace to her parents or to the whole village. One way to end the disgrace is for her to adopt a child, usually a relative, since it is believed that this will cause her to conceive.

In traditional Bulgarian culture it is women who are responsible for health care, and every woman masters a certain amount of medical knowledge during her life. But when a serious disease appears people call on a **healer**. She is an old woman (*baba* or grandmother) – if a younger woman ever becomes famous as a healer she too is known as 'grandmother'. The practice of healing is long-established and conservative, and is transmitted by inheritance between alternate generations: it is believed that healing abilities that are learnt rather than inherited are weaker and less effective against disease. Recent studies show that the healer remains an essential element in Bulgarian peasant society.

Initiation into the healer's knowledge is through a special ritual, in which the old healer, towards the end of her life, lets her heir into her secrets, blesses her and reveals the sacred texts. The initiate is usually a pre-pubertal girl, the first-born of the family, though if there is no girl, a boy can be initiated. The ceremony normally takes place at sunset, under a tree with two crowns, though it can also be performed in a church. Only the immediate participants may attend, since if an outsider hears the sacred texts these would lose their power. The old woman whispers the sacred information and the girl repeats it once aloud. This is quite enough, for when the 'right time' comes, the young woman will be blessed and helped by god to become a real healer. The initiate tries her powers first on a green tree – if it withers, she has mastered her teacher's abilities. But

⁵ Chuhovski, J. Obichajat 'Jalova Ponuda' v selo Gostilniza. In: *Problems of Bulgarian folklore*, vol. 7, Sofia, 1987, p. 282-290.

experimenting on a person is forbidden: since the healer's natural talent and energy is not yet fully controlled, the person might die.

The healer actively uses her knowledge and abilities only after the menopause, by which time she is already considered old. Traditionally, old age is close to the border between human life and eternity, and this boundary state permits the healer to mediate between life and the country beyond. Diseases are seen as inhabitants of this further realm, warning of danger for nature and for mankind: to preserve the status quo they must be driven back into their mysterious country. In this the healer, as mistress of rituals and controller of supernatural forces, acts as mediator, the ceremonial figure who reconciles the contradiction between chaos and (disturbed) order and thus keeps the community secure.

Within the village, where every life is in effect public property, the healer is given a certain independence. She lives behind the high walls of her house: no-one drops in for a chat, or visits her without a reason. This distance between her and the rest of the village comes from the idea that each treatment is a kind of border crossing to the supernatural, dangerous for ordinary people. So, despite her undoubted prestige – she is often given more respect than the priest or the teacher – her specific status drives her into isolation.

A similar social status is seen in the **village midwife**, known as *baba*, *babka* or *babuvachka* (grandmother)⁶. Her presence signals successful completion of pregnancy and childbirth. Maternity is seen as a universal act, bringing fertility in all its forms into the human world and embodying it at its highest level. It is the midwife who can contact this universal power and welcome new life into the world.

She is an old woman, often a widow, who has no sexual contact with men, and who has never had a stillborn child. She is expected to live a pious life, regularly receiving Communion and visiting monasteries. The medical knowledge she masters is taboo: no-one else must know the herbs or the spells she uses⁷. She is thus a mysterious figure: no-one asks about her personal life, about where she goes or whom she meets, and she is never to be disturbed without good reason.

A period of 40 days from the time of a birth is thought to be a time of imbalance in the stability of nature, and is a time of crisis for the mother, the baby, relatives and for the community as a whole. Only the midwife is not threatened. Although as a maternity nurse she knows how to deal with puerperal fever, her functions are to a great extent sacerdotal – it is said that she 'helps but does not

⁶ Genchev, S. Obichai i obredi svarzani s bremennostta, ragdane i otgledane na deteto. In: *Bulgarian Ethnography*, vol. 3, Sofia, 1985, p. 163.

⁷ Sike, Y. de. La nouvelle sagesse des femmes. *Civilisations*, vol. 36 no. 1-2, 1986, p. 140.

touch', not healing so much as 'expelling evil spirits'. She protects the mother and baby against *lausi*, malign ghosts⁸, and propitiates the *oristnitz* or 'weird sisters'⁹ who come on the third day after the birth to determine the child's destiny.

The midwife helps in 'dividing' the so-called 'one-months'. These are children of the same mother who were born in the same phase of the moon. People believe that such children are supernaturally linked, and if one of them falls ill or dies, the same will happen to the other. The midwife helps to break this link at an early age: she picks a fruit from a tree, divides it into two halves and gives each child a half to eat, murmuring a particular holy text as they do so¹⁰.

In popular belief the next child born in a family after a stillborn child is extremely vulnerable. To protect its life the midwife pierces its ear and inserts an earring made from a gold or silver coin, which is worn for the rest of the person's life. There is also a practice of wrapping the baby in a diaper intended for the dead infant.

In eastern Bulgaria there is a ceremony called 'setting children'. When a boy is one year old, on the first Thursday after Easter, before sunrise, the mother takes the child to the village tavern, where they meet the midwife. She puts the boy on a wine barrel, ties basil and flax round his head, gives him the spatula used for mixing bread dough and makes him hit the bottom of the barrel three times. Then she gives him some wine and blesses him, wishing him a good marriage. The basil and flax are put under a plum tree.

We can conclude from such rituals that the midwife is seen as different, with a specific status in the social organisation of the peasant community. On one hand she has completed the obligatory female social cycle, giving her the traditionally established roles and rights in this world. But on the other hand she stands at the border of the next social cycle, preparing for the world of the ancestors. This middle state defines her role as a mediator, bringing fertility from the universal to the human dimension.

This supernatural status is reflected in the custom of *Babinden* or Grandmother's Day¹¹, dedicated to the village midwife and celebrated on 8 January. This is the day commemorating Mary's purification after the so-called 'dirty

⁸ According to popular belief, these spirits are born in the souls of young mothers who died in childbirth and were buried without holy objects; they haunt houses where a baby is due, trying to grab the woman at the moment of birth. See: Georgieva, I. *Balgarska narodna mitologija*, Sofia, p. 165.

⁹ An ancient south-Slavic belief with links to Greek mythology. See: Georgieva, *op. cit.* p. 137-145; De Runz, I. *La sage-femme: les demones de la naissance et les petits pains des morts. Civilisations*, vol. 36 no. 1-2, 1986, p. 104, 108.

¹⁰ Author's information from the village of Konstantin, northern Bulgaria.

¹¹ The same celebration is known in Greece and Serbia. The day is also known as 'Women's Day'. See: Sike, Y. de. *op. cit.*, p. 143.

days’, the period of her lying-in, from 24 December to 7 January, though ancient pagan notions lie behind the Christian meaning. It is associated with fertility and the renewal of nature: the midwife’s abilities to cure infertility and to help the maternity process are linked to bringing fertility in all its forms. Through her connection with young mothers she is linked to all women in the village, but the rituals expressing this connection indicate more than simple gratitude – rather they hint at the need to obtain the midwife’s good will. She is to some extent a sanctified figure – for example, it is said that ‘whoever doesn’t wash her hands at *Babinden* will lick them in the other world’; it may be because of this belief that in many places in Bulgaria midwives are buried wearing gloves.

As we have seen, except for the rituals which she herself conducts, the midwife is quite isolated from her village community. At once respected and avoided, she resembles the image of the priestess and enchantress of ancient times.

Collective survival is a necessity in the traditional village, and it is this that directs social behaviour. The formalism of peasant life does not allow any deviations from the established lifestyle, and anyone who breaks the rules is immediately classed as an ‘alien’, a potential threat to the common harmony. Both the ugliest and the most beautiful girls are sent away to another village. The childless woman is a burden to her family and the entire community. Even healing ability can evoke powers which are dangerous if uncontrolled. In all this, peasant society is encouraging not the individual but rather the traditionally established rules which adjust the individual to life and communication within the framework of the community.

Peasant culture traditionally associates women with the powers of chaos¹², considering that she carries the powers of inchoate fertility. Women’s nature is controlled by the community by means of the obligatory stages of female socialisation. Those women who are isolated from community life are usually those who are mobile and can pose a threat to the social status quo.

The problem of socially alien women is closely related to the characteristic features of traditional Bulgarian culture. Its study presupposes a reconstruction of a model of traditional life, including popular ideas about nature, society and the community itself: the model which has provided the indispensable codex of meanings by which individuals in a traditional society have interpreted their experience and given direction to their acts¹³. The existence of such a model is a

¹² Civjan, T. La femme aux Balkans – conservatrice de l’information sacrée. In: *Die Stellung der Frau auf der Balkans*. Berlin, 1987, p. 99.

¹³ Geertz, C. Ritual and social change: a Javanese example. *American Anthropologist*, 59, 1975, p. 32-54.

condition for the existence of a peasant community; it can and does however change over time, to the extent that social developments move the borders of knowledge.

Traditional customs and social organisation are regulated and reproduced by the idea of collaboration between nature and society¹⁴. In the period we have looked at – late 19th to mid 20th centuries – this idea was motivated by the Christian myth: man and nature are created as equal and interdependent partners in a God-given universe. The rules for living and for interaction are established as part of God's plan¹⁵, and any change in the divine order is a danger for world stability and human existence. The social life of the Bulgarian peasant is fixed within this philosophical framework – ideas of good and evil, sin and virtue, the sense of human life. It is this that accounts for the attitude towards tradition, since everything that God ordained has necessarily to be handed down, from one generation to the next.

¹⁴ Bajburin, A. Mjastoto i roljata na rituala v narodnata kultura. *Bulgarian Ethnology*, 3-4, 1990, p. 32-54

¹⁵ Genesis, 2: 3-7.