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## Transnationality, Transculturality and Ethnicity: A Look at Balkan Fest, San Diego, California<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This text is the result of an ethnochoreological and anthropological investigation of folk dance practices at Balkan Fest in San Diego, California (2013 et seq.), in which the Bulgarian community plays a central role. Although Balkan Fest has already been approached in one of my earlier works, and the California Bulgarian community has been addressed in a paper discussing the 're-discovery' of Bulgarian folk dance, there was no focus on transnational and transcultural approaches (and experiences) in these works, which are addressed in the present text; these approaches are adopted here for setting the context and supporting my analysis. Balkan Fest reveals "ways of belonging", in which Bulgarian music and dance play an important role. This article proposes that, to many of the festival's attendees, the festival's campground became a space (a 'village,' a 'home') where one is physically absent, but spiritually and emotionally present in one's country of origin. Besides being a playground – both metaphorically and literally – the festival offers various activities for children to retain their Bulgarian ethnic identity (although raised as Bulgarian-Americans). Simultaneously, this is a California 'Balkan Fest,' in which people of different backgrounds meet, and where the dance floor becomes a venue for the convergence of various dance traditions.

### KEYWORDS

Music

Dance

Festival

Bulgarian community

USA

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## **Introduction**

This text is the result of an ethnochoreological and anthropological investigation of folk dance practices at Balkan Fest in San Diego, California (2013 et seq.), in which the Bulgarian community plays a central role. Although Balkan Fest has already been approached in one of my earlier works,<sup>2</sup> and the California Bulgarian community has been addressed in a paper discussing the ‘re-discovery’ of Bulgarian folk dance, there was no focus on transnational and transcultural approaches (and experiences) in these works, which are addressed in the present text; these approaches are adopted here for setting the context and supporting my analysis. Balkan Fest, with its mixture of music genres and dances, often informed by the Internet, its many Bulgarian guests (prevailing in numbers until 2018), the participation of Bulgarian cultural organizations (but not supported by the Bulgarian government), activities that keep Bulgarian children involved, non-Bulgarian friends (older generation Bulgaria and the Balkans music and dance lovers<sup>3</sup> and younger generation American musicians), and its large visibility on social media, strongly calls for an interdisciplinary approach.

Balkan Fest reveals “ways of belonging”,<sup>4</sup> in which Bulgarian music and dance play an important role. This article proposes that, to many of the festival’s attendees, the festival’s campground became a space (a ‘village,’ a ‘home’<sup>5</sup>) where one is physically absent, but spiritually and emotionally present in one’s country of origin. Besides being a playground – both metaphorically and literally –the festival offers various activities for children to retain their Bulgarian ethnic identity (although raised as Bulgarian-Americans). Simultaneously, this is a California ‘Balkan Fest’, in which people of different backgrounds meet, and where the dance floor becomes a venue for the convergence of various dance traditions.

## **Personal involvement**

In 2013 I was approached by the leaders of the Bulgarian community of Southern California, Petro Dushkov and Kalin Krumov. They invited me to open the festival’s dance workshop series at the designated dance floor. I have continuously (and happily)

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<sup>2</sup> See Ivanova-Nyberg, 2016. The wedding took place at the festival in 2014. The ceremony involved representative officials; it followed patterns of traditional Bulgarian village wedding. It was filmed and broadcasted by Bulgarian media. See Veselinov 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Laušević on the topic of ‘Balkan Fascination’ (Laušević, 2007), also Ivanova-Nyberg (2011).

<sup>4</sup> See Glick Schiller on migration studies (Glick Schiller 2008, with references to her earlier publications).

<sup>5</sup> Data from my surveys – personal archive of D. I. Nyberg.

conducted Bulgarian dance classes at the festival ever since, accompanied, over the years, by master musicians such as Vassil Bebelev (gaida), Vasil Denev (kaval), Rumen Sali Shopov (tupan), Stoyan Kostov–Pileto (tambura), and others.<sup>6</sup> By mentioning this I intent to clarify that in this paper I am not talking about ‘them’ (Bulgarians residing in Southern California) but about ‘us’– a community living outside our homeland that keeps strong ties with it. This community tries to build a respectable image of our culture, and to emotionally nurture ourselves through our involvement in the process. I am part of the scene – an artistic director, educator, and researcher, and I must bring this to the foreground.<sup>7</sup> Being an ‘insider’ to my object of study, I approach Balkan Fest from the position of a dance theoretician and practitioner heavily influenced by the scholarship of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology. The methodological and theoretical framework proposed here is related to my longtime involvement with this group (2002- ).

### **Methodology**

I gathered my field research data through discrete, but also very friendly, encounters with the Balkan Fest community over a period of seven years.<sup>8</sup> In this period I ‘thickened’ my descriptions so that I could gain a solid foundation for interpreting the data.

Today my archive includes participant-observation notes, surveys, formal and informal interviews, records of Facebook announcements posted by Balkan Fest organizers, comments by Balkan Fest attendees on the Balkan fest web page, a number of emails, Facebook communications, and a large body of visual materials. The photos and videos are taken by both myself and others, and are publicly shared on Facebook and YouTube. With this data (and with my own corporeal and other experiences), I began looking for proper concepts that would be useful in developing my interpretation and analyses.

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<sup>6</sup> In 2017, in addition to my dance class, I was invited to present my new poetry book to create a music and poetry event with composer/accordion virtuoso Milen Slavov-Slavman.

<sup>7</sup> As Bentz put it, “premises, perceptions and judgments of the researcher/writer should not be falsely ‘hidden’ or objectified, but clarified”; (...) research from this perspective is neither ‘objective’, nor ‘subjective’ – “knowledge comes a result of a dialectical process between one’s experiences and one’s interactions with others in the lifeworld” (Bentz, 1989: 2).

<sup>8</sup> In this way it is similar to the way in which Buckland describes her fieldwork – “The mode of my fieldwork constitutes ‘discrete encounters with the community’” (Buckland, 1999: 198).

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Transnationality***

This concept, used in its broader sense, highlights the importance of transnational studies, with their new perspectives on the significance of transnational social fields and “differentiations between ways of being, ways of becoming and ways of belonging” (Glick Schiller, 2008: 29). As used in my research, the concept of ‘transmigrants’ is understood to be describing migrants whose lives are “cutting across national boundaries” and are thus bringing two societies into a single social field (Glick Schiller, Blanc-Szanton, 1992: 1). Studies of the transnational migration paradigm<sup>9</sup> largely informed my research on issues related to transmigrants’ multiple identities and one’s ‘way of belonging’. Bulgarian music and dance now play an important role in building a new (and unexpected, to many of the Bulgarians who have been newly immersed into folk dancing) way of belonging (one of many). The way of belonging inspired by Bulgarian music, dance, and costumes became essential in the establishment of a new transnational social field.

### ***Transculturality***

The concept of transculturality<sup>10</sup> is brought in to address the points of intersection in the experiences of people of various ethnic, professional, and cultural backgrounds. The festival is, to use Brink’s description, by its “very heart,” a place that “*transcends* cultural boundaries,” (Brink, 1994: 344). It is transculturally conceived (Testa, 2014: 49)<sup>11</sup>. The combined perspectives of transnationality and transculturality are fundamental to the analyses when it comes to providing a larger context, within which folk dance and folk dancing during Balkan Fest can be viewed and analyzed.

### ***Ethnicity***

Research on transnational groups engages with the theory of ethnicity in a number of ways (Eriksen, 2013: 291). The concept of ethnicity, however, as informed by the studies conducted by Eriksen and others,<sup>12</sup> is used in analyses only as a framework. Attention is paid predominantly to the role of the existing cultural organization within

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<sup>9</sup> Notably those of Nina Glick Schiller, conducted alone or with others (See Schiller, 2012 with references).

<sup>10</sup> See Welsh, 1999; Epstein, 1999, Berry; Epstein, 1999; Dagnino, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion on festival see Testa, 2014; Testa, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See Eriksen 2000 with references.

the ethnic group, in this case, the Bulgarian community and PCHELA Bulgarian Cultural and Educational Society. Among the vast body of research on the interrelated topics of ethnicity, ethnic groups, and cultural identity,<sup>13</sup> Isajiw's work, *Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework*, provides helpful insights for understanding the 'young' and 'old' ethnic groups and the role of the existing cultural organization.

### **Balkan Fest: an overview**

Balkan Fest is located on private property in San Diego and is hosted by an American-Bulgarian family over the Memorial Day weekend.<sup>14</sup> It was envisioned as a Balkan village that has an annual 'family' reunion, during which everybody could enjoy "the true essence of life: back to nature, back to the village with its music, dance, food and family-like bonding."<sup>15</sup> The 'village' has (could have by law) up to 200 'relatives'. As research data shows, the 'relatives', that are either invited (musicians, dance and crafts instructors) or pay for their festival tickets, are of various backgrounds. They barely sleep but instead have the greatest capacity to eat, drink, tell stories, laugh, sing, and dance all day long and all through the nights. The fest was meant to create a memorable outdoor Balkan weekend.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Insights are also coming from the Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity (Shay; Sellers-Young 2016) and other sources.

<sup>14</sup> This family also hosts Flamenco fiesta, designed to showcase flamenco music and dancing. The Flamenco Fest takes place annually during Labor Day weekend. From here came the inspiration to also organize a Balkan Fest.

<sup>15</sup> M.B. (resource person) 2019; also B.C. (resource person) 2019.

<sup>16</sup> For stories, pictures and videos, visit: [https://www.facebook.com/Pchela.Edinenie/?ref=br\\_rs](https://www.facebook.com/Pchela.Edinenie/?ref=br_rs); <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Balkanfest/>. I would like to express here my thankfulness to Kalin Krumov for his reflections on the festival's origin, additional data, and also for his helpful comments on this paper's earlier draft.

Here is the outline from the 2013 edition:<sup>17</sup>

BCELA & MAHALATA PRESENTS:

BALKAN FEST “EUROPA ROOTS” (Bulgarian Spring Project)

San Diego, Memorial Day Weekend

...A contemporary folk tale with a twist, imagined and created by all participants

Orkestar “Meze” (Los Angeles) · Hot Blood Orkestar (San Diego) ·

Nestinari (Bay Area) · Balkan DJs · And Many More...

Folk Choreography Workshops Crafts and Arts Classes Jammin’ Around  
the Fire Pit· Camping Over PanEurhythmy· Dance Competitions·Kukeri·

Moonshine Brewing Bulgarian and Mediterranean Cuisine.

PRIVATE EVENT. BY INVITATION ONLY. LIMITED CAPACITY.

FOR COST, LOCATION, AND ADDITIONAL INFO FOLLOW THE RUMORS

The event wouldn’t come to life without the bohemian spirit of property owner B., an American, and his Bulgarian wife, M. – all smiles and all-levels supporter. B. loved the idea<sup>18</sup> of having Balkan Fest with three full days of eating, drinking, dancing, and singing – as in ancient times<sup>19</sup> and as in ‘Once upon a time’. Simultaneously, the local leaders (Petro Dushkov, Kalin Krumov, and others) had already worked on stimulating a ‘hunger’ for this kind of gathering in the community. They had already been working to stimulate a ‘hunger’ for such kinds of gatherings in the community. They had the talent and personal charisma to raise the excitement and support of their fellow countrymen. The fest was meant to be an event full of music, dance, and good ‘ethnic’ food – Balkan

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<sup>17</sup> The festival years up to this point (2018) are: 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2018. In 2015 the community around “Balkan Fest” joined “Antika-Bulgaria” Festival in San Francisco. Antika-Bulgaria is the oldest Bulgarian Festival in the United States. It was initiated by the choreographer Tanya Kostova (former soloist of Trakia Ensemble) in 2000 for celebration of the day of Slavic Literacy and Culture, Bulgarian language and the Cyrillic alphabet.

<sup>18</sup> In 2012 Petro Dushkov and Maria Bobeva attended the Flamenco Fest, organized by B. and they came up with the idea of hosting a Balkan Fest on the same property, if this would be welcomed by B. and other close friends and supporters. – Source: Petro Dushkov (personal communication, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> B. has developed an interest in Greek dances and Greek mythology since his college years. He was fascinated by Greek mythology and he even wrote an essay on “The Reality of the Gods” (1973). – Sources: B. (personal communication, 2019); Kalin Krumov (personal communication, 2019).

and Mediterranean – to create an artistic environment, in which all attendees would be involved in one way or another. But the fest grew into a more influential event than the creators ever imagined.

Each year since May 2013, B.'s property is transformed into an imagined, fairytale-like Balkan village, with a village square 'agora';<sup>20</sup> narrow hilly paths – 'streets', workshops, including a pottery craft-shop with a potter's wheel, a corner for weaving/embroidery with a vertical loom, a table for masks and craft making – all extremely popular among the children – with traditional fabrics, pillows, artistically arranged across the village. Over the years there has also been a designated area for traditional style of *rakia* (brandy) making. Always popular are the areas for lamb roasting (fire-pit) and Turkish/Bosnian coffee (Bosnian House). Local massage specialists offer their services to those who eagerly look for such a treatment after hours of dancing and a lack of sleep. Every 'stage' and 'registration booth' are decorated. Many attendees wear stylized or traditional costumes, flowers, or wreaths.

The Balkan Fest has a dynamic life: every year there is a new theme, various classes are offered, different musicians and dance teachers are invited. However, the overall structure of having both classes and concerts remains the same. Many kinds of music are played on festival stages and various singing, instrumental, and dance workshops are presented. One of the property sites resembles a slice of an ancient amphitheater with stone seating where there is almost no space for dancing in front of the stage. It doesn't mean, however, that the attendees don't make room – quite the opposite. They are very resourceful when it comes to finding a dance floor anywhere, or imagining it.

The designated dance floor plays a central role for the collective 'fun': it is close to the outdoor kitchen and across from the sitting area with the fire pit. There is also an artistic 'corner'; (love couch) – in fact a semi-circle of stony benches dressed with fabrics and pillows, comfortably arranged for sitting or standing. This place is used for singing and instrumental workshops and also for jamming and poetry readings.

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<sup>20</sup> There actual 'agora' – the largest meeting area on the property, is covered by a parachute above an outdoor carpet (it is called "parachute area" and is used for Yoga and Paneurhythmy). The agora's dance floor is just nearby. It was initially built for Flamenco dance and is suitable for 20-30 dancers (for a workshop). During the concerts, however, the dance lines spread outside the designated floor and the dancers may number 100 people.

Up to 2018, every year new, playful [posters](#) were created by Bulgarian artists.<sup>21</sup> The characteristics of 'playful' is really important; the play-dimension is one of the features of this festival in general. The colorful drawings (similar to the posters) beautify the fest's ceramic cups:<sup>22</sup> everyone receives such a cup with one's own name on it and most people take it home as a 'tangible' memory (souvenir) along with the intangible ones.

The initial name of the festival was 'Balkan Fest Europa Roots.' In 2018, although the idea of Europa roots remained, the fest appeared with the title 'Tales and Songs.' Chief organizers for this edition were the property owner and PCHELA.<sup>23</sup>

To Kalin Krumov- PCHELA's Board member, whose nick-name is '*kmeta*' (the mayor), the involvement of children in various artistic projects, workshops, and activities was imperative, regardless of the transformations that Balkan Fest might undergo. These children and teens, according to Krumov, (some coming to Balkan Fest for five years and looking forward to it) would be immersed in this free-spirited, creative environment, in this particular music and dance milieu. They would absorb this way of celebrating life with arts and would ideally keep this going when they grow up. In 2018 the storytelling component initiated by Krumov earlier (inspired by Bulgarian puppet personage from 1970s-80s generation's childhood) included children of all ages. Young actors successfully adapted a terrace-like ground as a stage, created their own scenario (in Bulgarian), and invited the available camp musicians to join them. They sang and performed (in Bulgarian) before their parents with confidence and great success.

Many hardworking and creative people, whose names simply cannot be listed here in detail, stand behind the organizing and artistic teams. The impact of their efforts,

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<sup>21</sup> Mariana Kalacheva - Alisa (2013; 2018), Angel Vasilev (2014), Toni Marinov (2016), Vili Nikolov (2017).

<sup>22</sup> Over the years the cups had headlines such as: "П.Ч.Е.Л.А & MAHALATA PRESENT: BALKAN FEST "EUROPA ROOTS" (Bulgarian Spring Project) (2013); "...A CONTEMPORARY FOLK TALE WITH A TWIST, IMAGINED AND CREATED BY ALL PARTICIPANTS (2014); "П.Ч.Е.Л.А & HITTERPETTER PRESENT: BULGARIAN SPRING PROJECT, BALKAN FEST "EUROPA ROOTS" (2016); BASILIO, PCHELA & HITTERPETTER: BALKAN FEST "EUROPA ROOTS" (2017); BALKAN FEST 2018: PATILANDIA.

<sup>23</sup> The 2018 organizing team included:

B. C. and M. B.- hosts; Kalin Kroumov, Rumen Petrov, Ivan VeleV - PCHELA - Performing artists and performers, budgeting , marketing and IT support; Inna Taskaeva - Registration team leader, volunteers and decorations; Stanislava Nyakoulov - Kitchen team leader, volunteers and decorations; PATILNADIA - Arts'n' Crafts classes; Vessie Kazachka - Traditional Embroidery; Mariya Apostolova - Arts and crafts, textile; Biliانا Popova, - Pottery and Clay; Ralitzа Katz - Arts and Crafts; Nikolena Shopova - Puppet show and street theater decors; Milen Slavov - SLAVMAN PROJECT - Saturday night concert concept and selection of music and performers; Bogdan Darev - FILMABEE - Kino Balkan - Selection of films and visual art. - Source: Kalin Krumov (personal communication, 2018).



however, is well-expressed on Facebook and other social media outlets – there are hundreds of post-event comments shared by the festival’s participants; these are also considered to be an important source for this anthropological study.

### **The festival’s attendees**

In an interview from 2015, Petro Dushkov, who belonged to the cohort of Balkan Fest’s driving forces, shared that among the goals of the artistic team is to attract ‘modern’ people – Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians.<sup>24</sup> Who might these ‘modern’ people be? And what kind of music would speak to them?

The majority of attendees are Bulgarians residing in California, highly educated and professional people in their 30s and 40s, with a wide range of specializations. There are several people with professional backgrounds in film, drama, arts and crafts, and their involvement inevitably impacted the spirit, the feel, and the ‘look’ of the campground. Most festival participants settled in California on the threshold of this century (or earlier), having received their higher education either in Bulgaria or in the United States. Their children were born in the US (mostly in the past 15 years). The majority of these Bulgarians had never before danced Bulgarian dances, had never listened to Bulgarian folk music, or worn traditional costumes. Their appreciation of Bulgarian music and dance evolved gradually after their settlement in the States.<sup>25</sup> To Krumov, these are Bulgarians that do not ‘hate Bulgaria;’ they came to the States to seek better futures for themselves and their children. Ideally, when possible, many would spend six months a year in Bulgaria and six in the States (Krumov, Kalin. Interview, September 30, 2015).

Not all of the Bulgarian attendees share the same enthusiasm toward Bulgarian and Balkan music and dance. Quite often, however, one of the spouses does; she or he may be an enthusiastic member of one of the several newly-established Bulgarian folk dance groups in California. In any case, the air is so full of sounds, activities, and friendly social interactions that everyone can find one’s own way to enjoy and relax.

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<sup>24</sup> Dushkov, Petro. Personal interview, October 1, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion see Ivanova-Nyberg 2015.

The majority of non-Bulgarians are local friends of the members of the Bulgarian community, among them – very few with Balkan ties. Many are musicians that are involved in the festival program.

There are always guests from outside California, Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians, who are often involved in the festival program. Some come from other parts of North America and Europe, including Bulgaria.

### **Music and musicians**

The artistic team invites a wide variety of musicians and bands. These are Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians residing in the US or coming from outside the States, with professional music educations or other backgrounds. These musicians bring to the festival both their artistry and passion toward their music, as well as friendly rapport with the hosts, attendees, and the venue.

#### ***Bulgarian musicians residing in the US***

There is a number of professional Bulgarian musicians leaving in the United States and the fest's organizers took the opportunity to approach them. These musicians came to the US in the late 1990's after studying their traditional instrument for years at professional music schools in Shiroka Luka or Kotel. The majority of them have earned their higher music / music pedagogy degrees from Plovdiv's Music and Dance Academy (now Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts). Most of the instrumentalists have performed for years with professional folk ensembles in the homeland and internationally. The singers have established successful careers as soloists, choir members and directors, vocal pedagogues (Tzvetanka Varimezova, Maria Bebelekova, Donka Koleva, Zhivka Papancheva). Only a few of these continue to practice their profession full time in the States.

The evening concerts with dancing, where Bulgarian musicians, who hadn't seen each other for years or decades, play together, became especially dear. These musicians are now coming from different states but they are all alumni of the same (or similar) professional training schools,<sup>26</sup> are able to create powerful performances 'on the spot.' They play familiar Bulgarian motives but they also play their solos with the support of

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<sup>26</sup> National School of Folk Arts – Shiroka Laka, Bulgaria, Filip Kutev's National School for Folk Arts – Kotel, Bulgaria, The Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

their colleagues. Instrumentalists take turns as soloists and backup players, just like the vocalists.

Not all Bulgarian musicians specialized in traditional instruments. Milen Kirov, for example, is a classical pianist and composer of classical pieces based on Bulgarian folklore,<sup>27</sup> who plays the keyboard with his Orkestar MÉZÉ (MÉZÉ is Milen's project as well<sup>28</sup>). Milen Slavov – Slavman, on the other hand, studied *tambura* (a long-necked picked string instrument) from his home country's music school in Kotel, but developed a prolific career as an accordionist-composer and producer.<sup>29</sup> The music that these virtuoso-musicians – Kirov and Slavman bring to the fest may be viewed as representative examples of combining 'old' traditional Bulgarian patterns and 'new' (blending of various genres<sup>30</sup>) author's compositions. Among the singers such a cross-over-musical vocalist is Zhivka Papancheva, Milen Slavov's wife; Zhivka is a renowned voice from Strandzha (Southeast Bulgaria) and is also a soloist in Milen Slavov's vocal compositions. The singer Vlada Tomova (New York), on the other hand, is not a trained folk singer, but blends folk motives with jazz and other styles.

### ***Bulgarian musicians from outside the US***

#### *- From Western Europe*

Ludmil Kroumov is a jazz guitarist who studied in the Netherlands. He is a virtuoso, who only recently discovered the power of Bulgarian folk music and currently plays *tambura*. Ludmil attended Balkan Fest in 2018 and made a memorable appearance. He was described to me as a "very talented and brilliant jazz guitarist who currently works with Teodosii Spasov, Peyo Peev, and other established names in Bulgarian folk music."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> About Milen Kirov: <http://www.milenkirov.net/>

<sup>28</sup> About MÉZÉ: <http://orkestarmeze.com/about/>

<sup>29</sup> In 2000, the US government granted Slavman permanent residency as an "Artist of Extraordinary Ability." See <https://www.slavman.com/milen/>

<sup>30</sup> Slavov describes it as "original world music fusion – incorporating Bulgarian, classical, and jazz idioms" – with a reference to 'Slavman Accordion Fusion' EBook Workshop. (Slavov, Milen. E-mail correspondence, June 6, 2019)

<sup>31</sup> Ludmil presented a master class in Bulgarian traditional folk music rhythms at LACC (Los Angeles City College) Department of Music, East Hollywood, LA, sponsored by PCHELA (Kroumov. Kalin. E-mail correspondence, 2018).

- *From Bulgaria*

An example of musical variety can be found in the 2016 program. There were two very different kinds of performers from Bulgaria who attended the festival that year<sup>32</sup>: the renowned Rhodope singer Valya Balkanska with her bagpiper Petar Yanev, and Oratnitza band. Both Balkanska and Yanev have strong reputations as performers of traditional Bulgarian music. On Oratnitza's website, on the other hand, one can read the following:

Ever since their birth Oratnitza has been driven by their curiosity to find out what lies beyond the musical status quo. This has made them take Bulgarian folklore on a wild journey. Over the years their repertoire has absorbed colors and scents from the local underground and distant continents alike. Bringing the treasures from their explorations home, they pass on the torch of tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Oratnitza's music relies on instruments such as *kaval* (shepherd flute, Bulgarian traditional instrument), synths, electronics, *didgeridoo* (wind instrument, developed by indigenous Australians), *cajon* (a box-shaped percussion instrument originally from Peru), *tupan* (Bulgarian drum), and vocals. Such blending of genres and instruments, although in different manners, is mostly brought to the fest by bands such as Oratnitza, and musicians without ethnic ties to the Balkans.

***Musicians without ethnic ties to the Balkans***

Among non-Bulgarians there are musicians of various backgrounds and ages. The younger generation usually presents musical themes that are less related to the Balkans (with the exception of 'MÉZÉ' led by Milen Kirov). The older generation (Dromia Band from San Diego, for example) would play various Balkan tunes that are 'danceable' (well-recognized line dances). A significant factor for the latter's repertoire is the fact that, among the band members, there are long-time folk dancers and also dance leaders (Mary Marshall from 'Dromia'). An example of a passionate *kaval* player and admirer of the 'old school' *kaval* masters is John Gibson, who is also a long-time member of the Californian Balkan folk dance community, an exceptional dancer, and former member of

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<sup>32</sup> The attendance in the festival became part of the artist's US tours of 2016.

<sup>33</sup> <https://oratnitza.bandcamp.com/>

Aman Ensemble.<sup>34</sup> These are just two snapshots from a broad array of other examples that invite a cross-cultural approach. This raises topics to be explored through an ongoing investigation by the researcher: 1) the impact of Balkan music and dance on the American International folk dance movement, 2) the reverse impact of the American folk dance movement and repertoire on the contemporary practices of Bulgarian communities across the States, and 3) their cultural interaction and exchange.

### ***Instrumental workshops, jamming, singing***

These activities are inseparable from the festival. Invited Bulgarian master musicians are always open to working one-on-one with students. Students are of different levels of expertise, and the material varies, accordingly. Festival musicians eagerly attend the various opportunities to play together and jamming happens all the time – on one or another corner of the campground.

Singing is also an important component of the festival. It involves both women and men. The workshops were offered by the beloved professional Bulgarian singers mentioned above. These classes are typically taught as a separate activity in the afternoons. Songs are later repeated on the *agora* floor accompanied by musicians. Sometimes they are performed as line dances along with the appropriate dance steps. The singing around the fire pit often continues until morning. Singing and dancing are two of the many bonding experiences at the fest.

### **Dance and dancing**

Dancing at the Balkan Fest and dance skills of the attendees show rapid development. This comes as a result of the weekly dance classes offered in various parts of the large LA area. The following note by Kalin Krumov reveals the first steps in organizing folk dance activities.

Organized dancing started with baby steps in 2010 and after few organizational difficulties we introduced the decentralized concept of dancing groups of friends in a proximity of the neighborhoods in the urban area of Los Angeles and Orange County. ‘Opa Hey’ was made as exemplary group of how that can be accomplished followed by opening a

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<sup>34</sup> About Aman see for example <http://www.dancehistoryproject.org/index-of-organizations/aman-folk-ensemble/>

similar location in Orange County. To keep motivation going on we set a date for *Nadigravane* [Try-to-Outdance-me] (...), with the idea of having an annual event for dancing groups. That gave the boost for all other groups and people with no professional dance background to get organized and start their own dancing gathering. (Krumov, Kalin. E-mail correspondence, February, 2019)

Bulgarian cultural institutions in California and elsewhere existed prior to 2010. Since 2011, however, the wave of establishment of new Bulgarian cultural organizations, cultural and educational programs, schools, dance groups and festivals became especially noticeable.<sup>35</sup> With the growing number of Bulgarian dance groups in California, the dance skills and knowledge improved vastly; the appetite for learning more has also increased.

### ***Festival's folk choreographers and dance teachers***

In the period between 2013 and 2018 the artistic team had invited several Bulgarian choreographers from outside the state in addition to several local dance leaders – Bulgarians and others.<sup>36</sup> All these teachers brought versatile repertoire, predominantly from Bulgaria but also from other Balkan countries. The teachers' repertoire ranges from forgotten village dance patterns, to popular dances of the Balkans<sup>37</sup> and ensemble's compositions from the 1980s<sup>38</sup>– all equally enjoyed and welcomed by the festival's attendees.

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<sup>35</sup> See Ivanova-Nyberg (2014).

<sup>36</sup> From outside California: Tanya Kostova, Yulian Yordanov, Konstantin Marinov, Tanya Dimitrov, Petar Petrov and Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg; from outside the States: Iliana Bozhanova and Gergana Panova-Tekath; Local leaders: Veselka Vasileva, Denitsa Bogomilova and Diana Ivanova. Teachers with Balkan ethnic ties: Toni Petrulias (Greek Dances) and Paul Petrescu (Romanian Dances).

<sup>37</sup> This refers to the dance repertoire introduced by dance instructors of ethnic background different than Bulgarian.

<sup>38</sup> Folk dance ensemble's compositions refer to the 'standard' folk dance ensemble repertoire in Bulgaria from the 1970s and 1980s. Typically these are parts of a dance suite from one or another ethnographic region. The period of the 70s and the 80s is often described as the "golden age of Bulgarian folk stage choreography;" the genre itself was named "Bulgarian Stage Dance Art Based on Folklore". In this period (starting from 1944 and up to 1989) folk dance ensembles were fully supported by the Bulgarian government (ideologically, financially, and in every way). With this support, the professional institutions (for professional folk dancers in Sofia and for professional folk choreographers – in Plovdiv) provided specialized training that greatly influenced the folk dance scene in Bulgaria. For folk dance ensemble history and repertoire see Ivanova-Nyberg 2011.

### ***Dance floor dynamics***

The dance floor, figuratively speaking, has its own repertoire built over the festival's years. It mainly consists of popular Bulgarian dances such as '*Pravo (horo)*,' '*Pravo Trakiisko (horo)*,' '*Paydushko*,' '*Daychovo*,' '*Eleno Mome*,' '*Krivo*,' '*Chichovoto*,'<sup>39</sup> and others. And this could be expected, due to 'the international crowd.' According to Maria Bobeva,

The dance repertoire at Balkan Fest has not changed much throughout the years. Having people who only dance the most popular dances like '*Pravo Horo*' or '*Chichovoto*,' and of course the international crowd that has never experienced anything like Bulgarian line dancing, don't allow to 'hop' the complicated steps of '*Kopanitsa*' let's say. Of course, if the musicians get inspired to play something fast and elaborated, there would always be people to jump on 'stage' and dance their souls off but in general we dance more 'accessible' to the crowd dances. (Maria Bobeva, personal communication, June, 2019)

However, according to the researcher's observations, the dance skills of the regular festival attendees – members of one Bulgarian group or another – are growing and the latter comes as the result of their weekly practices. Each group's repertoire benefits from various sources: the preliminary knowledge of the group's leader(s), group's own research on the internet, and the repertoire brought by visiting choreographers from Bulgaria. All of these groups have also arranged some of their dances for stage performances and have purchased or created their stage costumes.<sup>40</sup> The annual 'Try-to-Outdance-me' competition (*Nikuldensko Nadigravane*), organized by PCHELA has served as a great stimulus for serious rehearsing and creation of stage repertoire.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 'Chichovoto' was introduced to Bulgarian folk dance clubs in Bulgaria by Bulgarian choreographers in the past 15 years.

<sup>40</sup> A unique example comes from the group Opa Hey LA, when ladies from the group transformed Ives Saint Laurent's black robes into litak's (sleeveless robe) of traditional Shop's costumes.

<sup>41</sup> This repertoire ranges from slightly arranged for stage traditional Bulgarian dances (with an arrangement either suggested by the visiting choreographer who introduced the dances to the group) or designed by the group itself. Example for this is the repertoire of D.E.B.A. Organic Dance Club (Bulgarian Folk Aerobics) and Opa Hey LA. Their stage repertoire is similar to the folk dance club's repertoire in Bulgaria (for further discussion see Ivanova-Nyberg 2016). On the other hand group such as XoroTropzti derives its repertoire ideas from the 'classical' ensemble repertoire. The group's founder, Veselka Vasileva, back in Bulgaria, was a member of 'Nashencheta' folk ensemble. "In late 2014, Vasil Tsarev, a passionate folk dancer, former member of ensemble Aura (Sofia, Bulgaria), and alumni of the world-renowned dance group, The Tamburitzans (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) joined XoroTropzti. Together, in January of 2015, Veselka and Vasil took the group to the next level by establishing a dance ensemble focused on building a

Among the other stimuli was the attendance of the largest Bulgarian festival in the States – ‘Verea’ in Chicago (2011-).<sup>42</sup> Most Californian groups made appearance(s) at the Chicago fest, along with having performances at local international cultural gatherings/festivals. One of the groups, Xorotroptzi went strictly in a performance direction and began to host their own full-program concerts.<sup>43</sup>

This growing dance experience of the festivals’ attendees allows for a lot of improvisation to evolve on the dance floor in the cases when the band plays unfamiliar music. The choreography happens on the spot when different dancers initiate particular patterns and change roles. This brings an additional satisfaction for the creative aspect of this joyful, mutual experience.<sup>44</sup> The following quote illustrates this experience rather well:

Led by one of our visiting choreographers, we would create a brand-new dance on the fly using our existing ‘database’ of dance moves. One time I was the leader and it was difficult, but very exciting at the same time to try to combine steps from Israeli dances that I know and Bulgarian dances and switch between them as we go. It got me thinking about how the dances that we now know have been created a long time ago in the Bulgarian villages. My favorite part of the festival is the night jam sessions. The musicians will grab their instruments and start playing and we would start singing till the little hours of the night. It would feel like getting a little piece of Bulgaria and your childhood back. (Isabela Arnaudov, personal communication, June, 2019)

Although rare, there are occasions when members of one particular dance group will present a complete choreography on the festival’s dance floor, and the rest of the fest’s attendees will sit around the ‘stage’ and enjoy the performance. This was the case with the Bulgarian group coming from Toronto, Canada. Local dancers from San Diego were

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repertoire of intricate dance choreographies from all seven folk regions of Bulgaria. The members of the ensemble learn, practice, and perform challenging footsteps and complex formations while maintaining synchronicity, upbeat energy, smiles, and having a great time.” (<http://www.xorotroptzi.com/about-us/>)

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the program from 2016:

<http://www.eurochicago.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Verea-2016-Brochure-v2.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> The third annual concert was held on March 30, 2019 in San Diego, California. For other performances see <http://www.xorotroptzi.com/about-us/>.

<sup>44</sup> Observed in 2018 to a Klezmer music performance of The Electrocarpatians band. Band’s musicians play bouzouki, bass, accordion, violin, trumpet, guitar, cajon and clarinet.



also among the performers (presenting a male-female 'try to outdance me' choreography).

There are always special dance classes for children at the festival.

### ***Other dance forms***

Among these are ZumBalkan (led by dancer, singer, and choreographer Anibal Diaz) and Balkan Dance Fit (led by Bulgarian health coach, dance and fitness instructor, Ana-Maria Georgieva). The latter is a dance form that incorporates various styles and most closely reflects the idea of crossing borders behind Balkan Fest. ZumBalkan, on the other hand, was a spontaneous idea that:

... came to us once we learned that our friend from Flamenco Fiesta 2012, Anibal Diaz, will be coming to the first Balkan Fest. My wife, Silvia, (who was not a big fan of folk dance, unlike her girlfriends) came up with the idea in the car while driving to San Diego. We introduced the idea to Anibal upon our arrival. Anibal, DJ Zhelko and Petro quickly created a list of songs with suitable beat. I just wrote on the billboard ZumBalkan... and *voila* we had a new version of Zumba. Playing with words is often what we do to make it fun. (Kalin Krumov, personal communication, October, 2018)

ZumBalkan was offered at the first editions of the festival and Balkan Dance Fit has been offered continuously. The music of the latter includes songs from 'Oratnitza' repertoire and other tunes that may fit the category of World music.<sup>45</sup>

Paneurhythmy, although also related to gymnastics, stands on a very different trajectory: it consists of gracious, peaceful and prayer-like movements. Paneurhythmy's music and strict movement patterns were taught decades ago by the Bulgarian spiritual teacher Beinsa Douno. Balkan Fest is the only fest of its type in the US that, according to the author's knowledge, welcomes Paneurhythmy in its program.<sup>46</sup> During the 2018

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<sup>45</sup> "World music" is used here in broader sense. Further clarification are offered elsewhere (Ivanova-Nyberg 2018).

<sup>46</sup> The class was offered by Boris Mitov. For an illustration of the first ten exercises (as practiced in Bulgaria) see: <http://www.panevritmia.info/?lang=en>. Exercises' explanations may be addressed here: [https://www.academia.edu/38287667/Supplement\\_to\\_the\\_paper\\_Paneurhythmy\\_in\\_Bulgaria\\_philosophical\\_aspects](https://www.academia.edu/38287667/Supplement_to_the_paper_Paneurhythmy_in_Bulgaria_philosophical_aspects).

edition of Balkan Fest, Paneurhythmy was attended by nearly 15 people and greatly appreciated.

### **Voices from the field**

After the 2019 Balkan Fest closed I approached several people with a request to write a paragraph about their experiences of Balkan Fest, folk dance, and dancing in general. Voiced below, their responses are linked with regards to their main focus 1) on children's experience and the impact of the fest on them; 2) the experience through music and dance, and 3) the overall impact of the festival. In most of the responses, however, these themes intermingle.

I first approached Ralitzka Katz, an artist with two young children who came from Northern California. This is what she wrote:

For someone who grew up dancing Bulgarian Folk dances and then didn't have any exposure to them for a whole 20 years, I can only try to explain what was it to enter the San Diego Balkan Fest! The live Bulgarian music, all the people dancing hand in hand at the *horo*, with a smile on their faces and a similar glow in their eyes... it was like a dream! I had bought only an evening ticket and thought I was going to stay only for a few hours then, but quickly decided to stay for the whole 3 days festival with my family and we haven't missed a second of it ever since. I've never met so many beautiful, like-minded people like in M. and B.'s place! A beautiful Balkan village in the heart of San Diego, where everyone is helping with what they can to make it happen/to live the dream. The main reason why I come year after year though are my two little boys. Born and raised in America, they absolutely LOVE our Balkan parallel universe. For four days they are running in the small village, playing with friends, enjoying all the kids' workshops happening during the day and concerts happening during the evening hours, being exposed to Bulgarian/Balkan music and dancing, Bulgarian language, in a cozy family environment, spending their days like in a real Bulgarian village during a Holiday, back in the days when kids didn't know what's an ipad or a video game. And this is exactly how I want my kids to grow up! (Ralitzka Katz, personal communication, June, 2019)

B.S., an architect and visual artists also came from Northern California. She was accompanied by her 15-year-old son:

I knew close to nothing about Bulgarian folk dance, in spite the fact that I grew up in Bulgaria and lived there until age 18. It was in California, at age 40, when I had the life-transforming experience to take my first Bulgarian folk dance class with Tanya Kostova. I had the visceral experience of direct connection with the energy, power and magic of my cultural roots and have been fortunate to enjoy this life-affirming force since. This affected me deeply: I developed strong sense of belonging and the healthy and art full habits of dancing, singing and contributing to the cultural activities with my Bulgarian folk dance community of Antika Bulgaria and the other groups in the US. My visual art and my personal life were also affected. I created a series of art works inspired by the poetry of Bulgarian folk songs. Also, my American-born 15 year old son who grew up in California proudly identifies as Bulgarian, dances and has had significant cultural experiences as a Balkan musician and part of Rumen Sali Shopov's band Meraklij (one of the main bands invited to the Balkan Festival in San Diego). Balkan Fest in San Diego has been an opportunity for Bulgarians and Americans touched by the Bulgarian dance and music from different parts of California and the USA to come together and celebrate the power, beauty and magic of our culture which binds us as a community and binds us as individual families. There is nothing like parents, children and grandparents being touched and uplifted by dancing, singing and playing music together. (S. B. personal communication, 2019)

Maria Bobeva, an actress and fervent dancer, member of D.E.B.A. – Orange County, mother of two, shared various observations on the Balkan Fest's uniqueness:

Another unique feature of Balkan Fest is exposing children, as young as two-three-year old to teenagers, to our culture and 'let them be' for three days. Unfortunately in our society kids tend to be raised as in 'aquarium' with overprotective parents always being there for them every step of their way. At the festival grounds is like being in your grandparents'

village in the old times - the absolute freedom and fun. Having various workshops like embroidery, kuker masks workshop, pottery, felting, xylography workshop and so on, keep the kiddos engaged most of the time so there is no time for boredom. Participating in all these workshops, being exposed to Balkan music, the constant dancing of 'horos', is what's bonding parents and children, not literally but on another level, something that will give fruits later on in their lives, because the youngsters will have a better understanding of their parents' culture. (Maria Bobeva, personal communication, June, 2019)

Izabela Arnaudov, a member of Opa Hey LA dance group also has two children:

My family has attended every single Balkan Fest since the beginning. My kids, now ages 12 and 16, keep asking about it and are so very excited when it approaches. My teenage son has stopped going places with us, except for Balkan fest. The atmosphere created there is unique and the kids have made amazing friends and have had bonding experiences that could not be found anywhere else. The Balkan fest has become a huge part of their identity as Bulgarian Americans. Although they do not participate too actively in the workshops, they still absorb the culture and learn from it. For me, during Balkan fest I have the opportunity to meet amazing choreographers and learn new and exciting dances. In the evening everyone is gathered on the dance floor. The line dance becomes a live organism and you are part of it – it's a wonderful feeling of peace, joy and belonging. We have heard many different types of music during the festival - eclectic music from different parts of the world – not just the Balkans. It has been a great experience to try to fit Bulgarian dance steps into a music that is not Bulgarian. (Isabela Arnaudov, personal communication, June, 2019)

Isabela provided a memoir of her own involvement in folk dancing, commenting also on her festival experience:

In 2011 a friend heard from a friend that there will be a lady from Chicago who will show Bulgarian dances. We decided to go. That moment was the

beginning for a whirlpool of events that changed my life. We decided to start getting together on a regular basis to dance. At that moment I know maybe 2 or 3 dances. Today I know hundreds. I believe that the introduction of Facebook also played an important role of the building of our community. It made it easier to communicate, meet people and coordinate events that got bigger and bigger. Five dance groups have been created in the Los Angeles/Orange county area ever since. Many of the participants have become good friends. We meet at many events and enjoy the beautiful music and dance. For the last 8 years I have been dancing almost every week, attended many festivals, Bulgarian and international, met many people and learned so much about the Bulgarian heritage, that I did not know from Bulgaria. One of the most meaningful and amazing experiences that happened as a result was the creation of the Balkan Fest. That is a three-day family event in San Diego, in which people participate in singing, dancing and art workshops during the day and at night there are concerts and dancing and later jam sessions lasting all night long. (Isabela Arnaudov, personal communication, June, 2019)

I approached two other women from Opa Hey LA: The first one, Inna Taskaeva sent the following comment:

Dancing Bulgarian Folklore is the absolute 'battery charger'. For sure I don't look at it as an exercise, even though I realize it is a good one. Dancing is a social thing, once a week, with my friends next to me, with stories, jokes, and drinks in between.

Dancing at the Balkan Fest brings that same social experience to a new, grand level! First of all, there are more friends on the '*horo*' – people that I don't get to see regularly. Then, we learn new dances 'live' – this communication with the teachers before, during, and after the class is magnificent. Lastly, and most important – live music. Dancing to live music is completely different than dancing to the recorded track, which one knows by heart. Also, there is this symbiosis between the '*horo*' and the musicians that is priceless. It was at the Balkan Fest that I experienced

people getting ecstatic by dancing '*pravo horo*' for 30 minutes for the first time. That '*horo*' was so alive I will never forget it. (Inna Taskaeva, personal communication, June, 2019)

To Vessie Kazachka (a camera person) who commented directly on her experience with Balkan Fest:

...the dancing remains one of the main reasons I go back every year, the others being the embroidery craft and the relaxing atmosphere with friends. Even though I dance with a folk group weekly, there is nothing like dancing with a lot of dancers to live music. And this event definitely emphasizes great live music and dancing. This is the biggest reason I go back every year. (Vessie Kazachka, personal communication, June, 2019)

Maria Bobeva sent a comment specifically on the difference between the regular dancing with her group and the dancing during the festival:

Dancing Bulgarian folklore dances is my weekly meditation. When I dance I space out. I don't think about anything else but where my feet are going next. I forget about all my day-to-day problems the moment I step into our cozy dance studio. And I breathe in all the good energy that is in the air in abundance of all the happy people I dance with! Dancing at Balkan Fest though goes to a whole another level. Having live music and 40-60 people dancing next to you is beyond comparison! It's like being in the middle of a hurricane of positive vibes and I absorb them all! And that's when I start screaming of joy. (Maria Bobeva, personal communication, June, 2019)

Milena Sergieva shared her observations specifically related to the repertoire (and the creative capability to combine steps, which is further addressed in the text):

I've been dancing Bulgarian folk dances in LA for the last 5 years and it's been astounding to me how much creativity and variety can exist in the world out of combinations between probably a dozen moves. It's also as fascinating to listen to the richness of beats and measures (from 7/8 to 15/16) as to experience the feeling of flying while dancing. Balkan fest has been consistently a celebration of life, dance and music and a gathering of

a special tribe. To me it is always a privilege to be there and Bulgarian dancing is definitely a shared experience, something that feels so much better when friends celebrate the joys of life together.

My life has been richer while discovering so many hidden dancing gems and the energy of those dancing them with all their hearts. (Milena Sergieva, personal communication, June, 2019)

Maria Bobeva pointed out her satisfaction with the fact that the visiting choreographers that conduct workshops are “the top-of-the-crop professional dancers and choreographers who reside in the US”:

... it is a huge privilege and this is what brings all the good spices and makes the festival dancing diverse. For us, as immigrants, dancing Bulgarian folklore dances is part of preserving our native identity. This is what makes us unique in the ‘melting pot’. Also the language of dance is ‘the shortest-cut’ to people’s hearts, isn’t it? (Maria Bobeva, personal communication, June, 2019)

The comments below express attachments to the festival that have a lot in common: live music, line/circle dances, holding hands, smiling faces, friendship and more.

Slavina Koleva-Carulli:

Being a first generation immigrant in Southern CA for over 20 years, I was really thrilled to discover Balkan Fest about 5 years ago. It is a unique, magical experience that brings a community of Bulgarian/Balkan people who care deeply about music, culture, art, folklore and most of all about maintaining the Bulgarian/Balkan tradition for immigrants and their children. The family friendly event offers full immersion, if one chooses to go the full 4-day duration. Every day has a well-crafted program, which includes classes in Bulgarian folk dance/*horos*, singing classes, poetry readings, kids pottery and craft activities, theater, concerts and improvised performances from masterful artists who come from all parts of the US and Bulgaria. During the fest I have met a lot of fellow Bulgarian immigrants and each one of them greeted me with warmth and shared

love for music and art. I have formed some deep friendships at the grounds of Balkan Fest and I always leave with a full heart, eagerly awaiting next year's celebration of the Balkan spirit. (Slavina Koleva-Carulli, personal communication, June, 2019)

Neli Iotzova:

Dancing the Bulgarian traditional dance '*horo*' is a very spiritual experience for me! Holding hands, moving in a circle, and exchanging positive energy connects me in a special way with the dancers, my homeland, and the universe. It's hard to describe the uplifting that happens on so many levels. It elevates my spirit, opens my horizons, and connects my past with my future. It unites me with others and makes me feel one with the universe. The time at the Balkan Fest is also a very special family time and a valuable bonding time. It offers the unique opportunity to introduce my children, born in the USA, to the vast variety of Bulgarian traditions, rituals, crafts, music, songs, dances, cinematography, and cuisine. It's the most natural and pleasant way to pass our rich cultural heritage from the past generations to the next. It's a special, warm feeling to be a part of an ancient culture and to be able to keep it alive and flourishing for the world population and for the years to come. I am very thankful to the organizers and the participants of Balkan Fest for the opportunity to practice, enrich, preserve, and share the Bulgarian cultural treasures! (Neli Iotzova, personal communication, June, 2019)

Evelina Pentcheva, a photographer, shares:

For 20 years in America I have never been able to feel at Home and at the same time I have never been closer to home. A giant has awakened within, an ancient rhythm, the rhythm of the Bulgarian heart. Holding hands week after week, weaving, healing, the Bulgarian dance is transforming us. It's allowing us to remember something not thought in school. Or even in family. It's something old and it feels like our old Bulgarian spirit. The festival is like an imagined world- full of colors, dancing, music, children's



workshops and happy laughters, performances... hugs... tears of joy, connection. It's an experience that somehow wipes away all worries and all connections with the fast paced noisy world and allows us to feel the true spirit of being part of a big beautiful family. It's fascinating. And it's enriching, empowering us as human beings... what a Blessing... a Gift to be able to experience this over and over again... and it's the true Home away from home. May it be! (Evelina Pentcheva, Personal communication, June, 2019)

The last 'voice' is of a young man, Fabi Srandev, whose mother, Denitsa Bogomilova, is a dancer and a leader of San Diego's folk dance group 'Mesechina' and whose grandmother was also a dancer. Fabi was born in 2004 in San Diego, California:

Well, dancing means the world for me! It lets you explore different styles/techniques of dances and my favorite... make new friends among the different festivals and concerts in the California area like the Antika Festival in San Francisco and Balkan Fest in San Diego. My experience at Balkan Fest was amazing because it brings a lot of different people together for the one thing we all have in common, our love for Bulgarian folklore. The 'thing' that would attract young people to the folklore dance floor would be two things. Number One would be introduce your children to Bulgarian folklore at a very young children and put them in a little folklore group where they can learn one or two simple hora. My number two would be to push your kids a little harder because I for one thing didn't like folklore up until the age of 12. When my mom would literally drag me to dance a *horo* and to this I credit my mom for my love of dance. All because she pushed me to do my best. (Fabi Srandev, personal communication, June, 2019)

With these (and many other, including those of American Balkan Fest regulars) 'voices' in mind, I am entering the analysis.

### **Analytical commentary**

In a post-positivist climate, states Buckland, the researcher recognizes that there is no single, stable and overriding interpretation. Voices from the field compete; “there is almost inevitably no consensus of interpretation that the ethnographer can publish nor one truth to be established” (Buckland, 1999:197). With this ‘safety-jacket,’ I will offer some of my interpretations.

### ***Balkan Fest in the prism of transnationality and ethnicity***

The reason for considering my data as related to (and informed by) the paradigm of transnationality (not transnationalism because all ‘-isms’ invite troubles), and for perceiving Bulgarian immigrants as ‘transmigrants’, is my observation that the majority of the members of the Bulgarian community residing in California indeed live in two worlds and benefit from (at least) two cultures. Most Bulgarians will live six months in Bulgaria and six months in the United States, as cited earlier (Krumov, 2015). Since this lifestyle is rather expensive, Bulgaria was brought to the States throughout various cultural practices. The involvement and participation in Balkan Fest is only one of them.<sup>47</sup>

PCHELA puts great effort in engaging children (mostly bilingual Bulgarians) in the festival program with its storytelling and acting. As is the case with many children of Bulgarian parents born in the States, the pattern (with a few exceptions) is: parents speak to their children in Bulgarian, children respond in English. Involvement in storytelling invites imagination, as well as encourages practice of Bulgarian language (and it is often said that language is “the second most prevalent indicator of ethnicity” – Peterson; Novak; Gleason, 1982: 8). Within the Bulgarian ethnic group,<sup>48</sup> such kind of care about fellow compatriots and their (our) children is usually expressed and offered by the group’s organization or organizations. In this case, PCHELA insists on engaging children in creative ways by practicing their mother tongue. Isajiw calls this kind of attitude “the moral dimension of identity” (Isajiw, 1992: 9).

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<sup>47</sup> The festival became a milieu where one’s affiliation to Bulgarian culture and folk traditions is proudly displayed (that is an adoption of certain forms of cultural representation). People who adopt such forms, according to Glick Schiller may “find themselves new participants in transnational social fields and from the belonging enter into a transnational way of being.” (Glick Schiller, 2008: 32).

<sup>48</sup> Bulgarians are a “young” (ethnic) group, in Isajiw’s terms (i.e., “those made up predominantly of the first - the immigrant - generation, and whose second generation is either small in size or young in age”).

The educational aspect goes beyond this. In fact, the design of a program with these music and dance classes serves as a vehicle for 1) dissemination of various dance traditions; 2) cultural transmission, and 3) sustaining Bulgarian cultural identity (via various cultural practices including Bulgarian arts and crafts).

Balkan Fest is a private but not a 'closed' event; pictures and videos are openly shared on social media with friends and family. The majority of the festival attendees' parents live in Bulgaria. They use social media (or their relatives do) and they are able to see their children and grandchildren dressed in folk costumes and involved in practices related to Bulgarian folk tradition and Bulgaria in general. These pictures bring great satisfaction to people who pose for or take them. However, family members in Bulgaria, where many parents of Bulgarian immigrants spend their days in solitude, especially appreciate them.

### ***Balkan Fest in the prism of transculturality***

Music and dance experience at Balkan Fest can be described as 'being in the flow' - in the flow of music, in the flow of dance, and beyond.<sup>49</sup> This is a human, let's say, transcultural experience. Similar experiences of "being in the flow" are observed and documented in other camps in Bulgaria and the United States, where the attendees are predominantly American Balkan music and dance lovers.<sup>50</sup> The same Bulgarian professionals that play at Balkan Fest are often among the musicians of the long-established American Balkan camps. Vassil Bebelev, for example, was a beloved bagpiper invited frequently to Mendocino Balkan camp; Rumen Sali Shopov (*tupan* and *tambura*) is another example, as are many of the names mentioned earlier.

Balkan Fest, to a certain extent, creates a ground 'outside' of any particular culture,<sup>51</sup> on which all attendees feel comfort and enjoyment. It is not only an event of 'ethnic' Bulgarians although Bulgarians prevail in numbers. It is not about particular music and dance traditions. The music includes various music genres and the dance repertoire consists of several dance traditions: Bulgarian village tradition, Bulgarian folk dance

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<sup>49</sup> See Csikszentmihalyi (2001).

<sup>50</sup> I have addressed this aspect in a paper about Seattle's Koleda Ensemble (1966-1974). See Ivanova-Nyberg (2016b).

<sup>51</sup> Although transculture depends on the efforts of separate individuals to overcome their identification with specific cultures, on another level it is a process of interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals find themselves "outside" of any particular culture, outside of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other limitations. (Epstein, 1999: 25).

ensemble tradition, (broadly) Balkan folk dance traditions, American Balkan folk dance tradition, and repertoire of Bulgarian folk dance clubs,<sup>52</sup> disseminated via the Internet. An example of the former would be a simple ‘*Pravo*’ (*horo*), or ‘*Selsko Shopsko*’ and for the latter– dances, such as ‘*Chichovoto*’ or ‘*Grutskoto*’ (these are arranged by Bulgarian professional choreographers). ‘*Lesnoto*’ in 7/8 (SQQ) is popular all around the Balkans and also in the States, among the American Balkan folk dance community. Examples of the folk dance clubs’ repertoire may be observed when dancers (that are from one and the same group) present versions of popular dances learned from Internet.

The Internet plays a significant role in building the dance repertoire of Californian groups, along with the influence of the Bulgarian choreographers visiting California. YouTube and Facebook videos provide huge amounts of material about the Bulgarian folk choreography, past and present, village repertoires (mostly from folk festivals like Koprivshitsa), folk dance tutorials, and repertoires of Bulgarian folk dance clubs.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Balkan Fest as a “time-out-of-time” experience***

Let’s not forget that this entire time, we have been talking about a festival. By its very nature (etymology and history) the festival is about abundance of food, festivity and celebration. It is a “time-out-of-time” experience.<sup>54</sup> It is an escape from the routines and a portal into another world. It is, as posters for Balkan Fest say, ‘A contemporary folk tale with a twist, imagined and created by all participants.’ At the same time, this ‘tale’ goes beyond the mere duration of the festival; when the festival is over there comes a time of reminiscence and anticipation of the next ‘adventure’; “I can’t wait until next year!”<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Humor at Balkan Fest as a bonding experience***

The humorous aspect of the festival is essential. Along with the playful imagery of the posters and the artistically expressed laughter upon some of the existing stereotypes of

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<sup>52</sup> On Bulgarian folk dance club’s genre see Ivanova-Nyberg (2016c).

<sup>53</sup> For a further discussion on the topic of the clubs see for example Grancharova (2013).

<sup>54</sup> For definition and morphology of the festival see Falassi (1987: 1-10) For recent research approaches and theoretical framework especially stimulating are works of Alessandro Testa (see Testa, 2014; Testa, 2019).

<sup>55</sup> On the festival’s temporality see Feinberg (2018: 138).

the Balkans, it often includes self-deprecating humor.<sup>56</sup> The latter naturally contributes to the family bonding experience.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Balkan Fest as a bridge building and family bonding event***

This festival plays a special role in the cultural life of Bulgarians and American Balkan music and dance lovers in California and across the US, because it provides an opportunity for professional musicians to present both ‘classical’ Bulgarian folk music as well as contemporary compositions. It serves as a bridge on many levels. It connects ‘modern’ Bulgarians with the sound of *gaida*, but also connects different genres, people of various ethnic backgrounds and age groups. Such meetings inspire mutual projects between cultural organizations (between PCHELA and Bulgarian Cultural and Heritage Center of Seattle – BCHCS, or Hitter Peter and BCHCS, for example), which go on to have further influence on the life of the Bulgarian communities in the US.

The topic of Bulgarian musicians and their lives in the US is a topic of its own.<sup>58</sup> It is important to stress, though, that these musicians play a significant role in family bonding throughout the festivals’ editions. The tragic loss of the beloved bagpiper Vassil Bebelev after his last appearance at the festival in 2016 led to an edition devoted to his memory. The 2017 fest turned out to be a very emotional event of everyone with musicians and audience/dancers alike expressing their love and support to his widow, Maria Bebeleva. Powerful music was playing on, songs were sung by hundreds, and the *horó*-line was graciously moving as if it had a soul of its own. One may call this intangible and unforgettable.

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<sup>56</sup> Various sketches created by the “mayor” of the LA Bulgarian community may be offered; for example: his “official role” during an actual wedding in 2014. See Ivanova-Nyberg, 2016a.

<sup>57</sup> It is to be understood as a bonding experience among the Balkan Fest community members but also between parents and children.

<sup>58</sup> Timothy Rice addressed this topic in a documentary movie about Tzvetanka and Ivan Varimezovi that he presented at various scholarly gatherings. As a music professor at UCLA, Rice secured positions for Varimezovi in the UCLA music department, having, prior to that Vassil Bebelev as a guest instructor.

## Summary

This research relates to a whole series of parallel studies of the American Balkan music and dance scene (with its history<sup>59</sup>), Bulgarian music and dance practices of Bulgarian migrants, and the points of crossover between them.<sup>60</sup>

Balkan Fest is small enough for people to see one another and large enough to host world-class musicians. It is a 'safe' environment for the elderly and the children. Most attendees are Bulgarians who have successfully gone through the processes of cultural adaptation. Involvement in folk dancing is a new love for the majority of them (most are part of the Rock-and-Roll generation). It is a village with figures that play designated roles (as in every village). It had its 'real' wedding. It is a camp similar to Balkanalia<sup>61</sup> and Mendocino,<sup>62</sup> but with the prevalence of Bulgarians, making it quite a different cultural phenomenon. The music ranges from Bulgarian traditional tunes to newly created compositions inspired by geographic areas and genres beyond the Balkans. There is a drive to educate children, to set an example. It is a format that is built across borders and genres. It informs the study of the culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century Bulgarian (trans) migrants, which is influenced by global economic processes, and is shaped by complex factors. Over the years it created tangible and intangible memories for both children and adults. It also became a fascinating topic for research. For my study (2013-2018) I am deeply indebted to California's Bulgarian community.<sup>63</sup>

It is the author's hope that this research may inspire other cultural gatherings like San Diego's Balkan Fest that incorporate various art forms inspired by Bulgarian folk traditions and involve children of Bulgarian immigrants.<sup>64</sup> This alone was a great stimulus for writing this paper. Simultaneously, there was an urge that could be described as 'the responsibility of the scholar abroad' to 'keep track' of the dynamics and processes within Bulgarian communities. It was even more so because of the changes

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<sup>59</sup> See Laušević (2007).

<sup>60</sup> Related to this is the cross-cultural approach, as applied by Nahachewsky (2012).

<sup>61</sup> See <<http://balkanalia.org/>>

<sup>62</sup> See Miller's research on Mendocino Balkan Camp (1994).

<sup>63</sup> This study is a part of an ongoing field research on the Bulgarian music and dance as practiced by Bulgarian communities in the States.

<sup>64</sup> The significance of the Balkan Fest was also recognized by scholars from Bulgaria. A research team from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, working on a project on migration, attended Balkan Fest in 2017, See (Penchev 2017: 186).

which were already taking place, in terms of problematic usage of Bulgarian language by the Bulgarian children born in the United States.

As a common ground for Bulgarians and non-Bulgarians, parents and children, this festival provides 'a milieu' for ongoing investigations on transnationality, transculturality (but also crossculturality<sup>65</sup>), and ethnicity.

### **Conclusion**

In order to discover the roots of arts, one must look at sources from antiquity. If one excavates deeply enough, one reaches the stratum where recitations, music, songs, and movements (dance, as Europeans call it) are inseparable parts of an organic cultural entity (ritual). Balkan Fest probably didn't dig this deeply, and yet, its sensitivity to cultural roots brought to life a cultural event rich in its complexity. By 'being in the flow,' one may be absent from one's homeland, yet present in one's culture and satisfied with its fruits.

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<sup>65</sup> Related to this is the cross-cultural approach, as applied by Nahachewsky (2012).

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