Bai Ganyo Today: New Approaches to a Bulgarian Classic

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Although Ivan Vazov's 1894 novel Pod igota 'Under the Yoke' — an account of the unsuccessful 1876 April Uprising of Bulgarian Christians against Turkish rule — is still popularly considered in Bulgaria itself to be the most important work of Bulgarian literature,1 Aleko Konstantinov's 1895 novel Bai Ganyo — a satirical account of the adventures and misadventures of a Bulgarian anti-hero in "Europe" and in Bulgaria — has attracted considerably more attention in western scholarship (Todorova 1997: 38-61, Daskalov 2001, Noeberger 2006, among others). Even in 1913, a U.S. periodical (The Independent, 2 January, p. 30) hailed Bai Ganyo as "the first classic of a national literature," and among scholars of Balkan and South Slavic literature, it is recognized as such. While the themes of Pod igota are central to modern Bulgarian nation-building, and moreover, are relatively simple in their portrayal of innocent, downtrodden Bulgarians and fiendish, oppressive Turks, Bai Ganyo is subtle and critical. Vazov is concerned with building the nation; Aleko treats the nation as a given and is concerned with portraying it and shaping it. For Vazov the events of 1876 constitute a basis for Bulgarian national identity, whereas for Aleko they provide a reference for a critique of Bulgaria's national present. In Bai Ganyo Don Elenko, the narrator compares Bai Ganyo and his thugs, who are about to throw an election, to Faizi Paša and bashibouziks (Friedman 2010: 119).2 In Bai Ganyo Goz Viteliq, the narrator describes Bai Ganyo's new-found companion Bokov as someone who is so selfish and unscrupulous that he would falsely claim to be a refugee from Batak just to cadge money from charitable organizations (Ibid.: 57).3 The result of Aleko's comic critique is a work that has stood the test of time. It has been required reading in Bulgarian schools regardless of the political orientation of the regime, and its themes are not only as pertinent today as they were more than a century ago, but they also speak beyond the borders of Bulgaria, to the Balkans, to Europe and to life in general.

One of the outstanding features of the novel is Aleko's masterful and subtle use of the Bulgarian language, a feature which both contributes to the novel's

significance and has hindered its translation into English. To mark the first scholarly translation of *Bai Ganyo* into English (Friedman 2010), we, the translators, organized a roundtable at the 2010 annual meeting of Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in order to examine aspects of *Bai Ganyo* that either have not been explored or that could be explored further with fresh perspectives. The roundtable was such a success that we agreed to formalize our presentations and they are gathered together here.

The articles by Kramer and Rudin look at traditional Balkan themes in *Bai Ganyo* from a modern perspective. Much has been written over the years about *Homō Balcanicus* and about the Balkans as the locus of a specific intersection between an imagined “East” and “West” (see for example Sedokova and Civ’jan 2001), and the modern scholarly such as that by Todorova, Daskalov and Neuberger mentioned above are all concerned with various aspects of *Bai Ganyo* as reflection and projection of internal and external visions of both the Balkans and “Europe.” Kramer, however, adds a new dimension to these investigations by looking specifically at *Pir Balcanicus* and *Müller Balcanicus*, i.e., by interrogating gender and its stereotypes in *Bai Ganyo*. The interrogation in turn helps explain the combination of affection and discomfort felt by many modern Bulgarians vis-à-vis the novel. Rudin, in her article on “*Bai Ganyo’s* revenge,” turns to the well-studied theme of Turkisms in *Bai Ganyo* (see, for example, Kramer 1992) and provides a valuable update on the status of linguistic changes that have occurred in Bulgarian and Bulgarian since 1989. She finds that many aspects of Aleko’s language have become quaint and old-fashioned, it is precisely this legacy of Bulgaria’s Ottoman past that has retained a freshness and vitality that serve the language as well today as they did when Aleko was writing. This fact stands in sharp contrast to Dakova’s (1983) claim — on the eve of Todor Zhivkov’s anti-Muslim and anti-Turkish campaign against Bulgarian citizens — that *Bai Ganyo* and his Turkisms have outlived their time and died out.

The articles by Friedman and Fielder examine two very different indexical features of Aleko’s use of language. Fielder’s article examines the problem of authenticity and indexicality through Aleko’s use of discourse markers, with a focus on those of Turkish origin, which, like the Turkisms discussed by Rudin, sometimes presented the most intractably difficult problems for us as translators. As Fielder makes clear, the Turkish origins of these particles influence not only their usage and perceived value, but also the construction of competing authenticities in the text. Friedman’s article likewise discusses indexicality, but through the prism of precisely those languages marked as not being Bulgarian. Although *Bai Ganyo* is a masterpiece of the Bulgarian language, Aleko uses eleven other languages in the course of the novel. Friedman shows how both Balkan and “European” languages are deployed by Aleko not just for stylistic effect, but to index both critique and approval. At the same time, Aleko’s codeswitches reveal stereotypes held by the author himself. In this sense, Friedman’s article connects with Kramer’s discussion of the fate of such stereotypes and Rudin’s discussion of the valance of Turkisms (as opposed to switches into Turkish) as well as Fielder’s observations on indexicality.

As a group, these articles are intended to demonstrate the continued richness of *Bai Ganyo* for many different fields of investigation in literary, cultural, and linguistic studies.

Notes
1. I thank Yana Haskova of The Ohio State University for this information, which is based on a poll taken in Bulgaria.
2. Batchakova were Ottoman paramilitaries noted for their ferocity. At the time of the April 1876 uprising, Aleko was a high school student in Gabrovo. Fezli Pasha and his army suddenly occupied the school, but the school board managed to spirit the students away to private houses.
3. Bitik, in the western Rhodope Mountains, was the site of an infamous massacre in the Turkish reprisals that followed the April Uprising of 1876.

References


1. Prologue: Pride, Affection and Embarrassment: What’s Wrong with Bai Ganyo?

When the English language translation of Bai Ganyo (Friedman 2010b) was published, I considered holding a book launch in Toronto, which has a large and well-educated Bulgarian community. There is a Bulgarian students’ club at the University of Toronto, at least one Bulgarian radio station, Bulgarian newspapers, churches, restaurants and even a Bulgarian consulate. The Bulgarian community sponsors annual events at the University of Toronto, typically events involving visiting politicians or business people. The possibility of having a launch of Bai Ganyo in Toronto seemed natural. I even had the venue picked out, a Bulgarian-owned, Russian-themed bar complete with blond-haired waiters in black boots, fur hats and red Russian shirts (see Bai Ganyo the Journalist, pp. 123-24). I contacted the Bulgarian consulate and sent along a draft of Victor Friedman’s scholarly introduction (3-11) and a short excerpt. Bai Ganyo at the Baths (24-28). I followed up with an invitation to meet someone from the consulate for coffee to discuss the launch. As we sat down in a trendy café, I waited to hear his delight in the project.

His first remark was the following: “Reading Bai Ganyo in English was really weird.” We spoke for about forty minutes and then he concluded by saying, “This would be very problematic for the community here. Look here on the cover: Tales of a Modern Bulgarian. I know that the title of the original...” My vision of the Toronto launch began to fade. Undaunted, I approached the owners of the Russian-themed bar hoping they might still want to stage the Bulgarian cultural night we had discussed, which would feature readings from Bai Ganyo. I gave them copies of the book to read. A month later my calls and e-mails remained unanswered.

This experience led me to reflect on the persistence of stereotypes not only of Bulgaria, but in Bulgaria. If (incredible) tales of a “modern Bulgarian” seemed too hot for the Toronto community to handle, it must be that some Bulgarians feel that our century-old hero will be read as a modern modern-day Vir Balcanicus.