

BALKANISTICA

Volume 25:1
2012

Edited by
Donald L. Dyer

Published for
The South East European Studies Association

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Bai Ganyo Today: New Approaches to a Bulgarian Classic

Victor A. Friedman
University of Chicago

Although Ivan Vazov's 1894 novel *Pod igoto* '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, Neuberger 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 igoto* 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 Does Elections* the narrator compares Bai Ganyo and his thugs, who are about to throw an election, to Fazli Pasha and bashibozuks (Friedman 2010: 119).² In *Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting*, the narrator describes Bai Ganyo's new-found companion Bodkov 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 *Homo Balcanicus* and about the Balkans as the locus of a specific intersection between an imagined "East" and "West" (see for example Sedakova and Civ'jan 2001), and the modern scholarship 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 *Vir Balkanicus* and *Mulier Balkanica*, 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 in the face of linguistic changes that have occurred in Bulgaria and Bulgarian since 1989. She finds that while 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 influences 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 valence 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 Hashamova of The Ohio State University for this information, which is based on a poll taken in Bulgaria.
2. Bashibozuks were Ottoman paramilitaries noted for their ferocity. At the time of the April 1876 uprising, Aleko was a high school student in Gabrovo. Fazli Pasha and his army suddenly occupied the school, but the school wardens managed to spirit the students away to private houses.
3. Batak, in the western Rhodope Mountains, was the site of an infamous massacre in the Turkish reprisals that followed the April Uprising of 1876.

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