

A Play to Banish the Darkness: The domestication of death in Bulgarian folk traditions

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This is an author's accepted manuscript of:

Fawcus, R. (2026). A play to banish the darkness: The domestication of death in Bulgarian folk traditions. In B. Wyatt, H. Stewart, J. Kennell, & P. R. Stone (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Dark Events* (pp. 19–29). Routledge.

The final published version is available at:

<https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Dark-Events-Celebrations-Heritage-and-Customs-of-Death-and-the-Macabre/Wyatt-Stewart-Kennell-Stone/p/book/9781032766706>

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Abstract

In Bulgarian folk tradition, the kukeri are performers who conduct public rituals and visit homes each January to symbolically banish the winter and its attendant evil spirits, thereby welcoming the return of spring. Dressed in costumes made from fur, wool and wood, they wear noisy cattle bells and may be adorned with macabre elements, including real or crafted animal skulls and other taxidermied parts. As in UK mumming traditions, the troupe (including archetypes such as a priest, a king, young lovers and death personified) perform short plays depicting death, procreation and rebirth. Believed to be thousands of years old with its roots in antiquity, the tradition has survived through eras of Ottoman occupation and communist rule. Scholarly work on the subject has considered the kukeri from archaeological and anthropological perspectives and examines the contemporary kukeri within a paradigm of post-socialist national and folk revival. This chapter explores new dimensions by assessing the tradition through the lens of dark event studies. The chapter critically evaluates the performance of this public dark ritual as a mode of 'domesticating death', as well as exploring the transtemporal nature of such dark symbolism and its role in building and maintaining a shared national identity.



Figure 1.1 A troupe of kukeri (from the village of Mogila in Yambol province) perform to crowds at the Surva International Festival of Masquerade Games in Pernik, Bulgaria (January 2017). Photograph by the author.

Introduction

It is sometime around midnight in January 2017. I have just finished guiding a week-long tour of Bulgaria for a group of eight American tourists. We had our final meal together, and now I am sitting outside Hotel Rila in Sofia, finally alone with my thoughts. A Bulgarian man asks me for a light – I do not have one, but we talk anyway. His name is Konstantin, a Stara Zagora native who came to the capital to perform in the Surva masquerade festival at nearby Pernik with his troupe of *kukeri*. I tell him that I took a group to see the performance. He smiles and replies that: *No*, I did not see it. Konstantin explains to me that the kukeri ritual can only be *seen* through the eyeholes of a kuker's mask. It is not performed for the benefit of spectators, he suggests, but rather is an ancient initiation rite for the young men of the community.

The kukeri tradition is a folk practice in Bulgaria, which sees monstrous masked performers – known as kukeri or survakari – roam the streets of towns and villages and conduct public rituals intended to banish winter and its evil spirits. This chapter considers the tradition through the lens of dark events studies and as a form of community discourse that uses dark symbolism to transmit narratives of bonding and kinship. Field notes made during a 2017 visit to the Surva Festival in Pernik illustrate the tradition with first-hand observations, adding an ethnographic dimension to the chapter. The chapter considers the ritual reframed, not as outward performance, but rather as initiation for members of a community, thereby asking who the kukeri ritual is performed for and what its continued practice provides for contemporary Bulgarian people and society. This chapter closes with a consideration of the ritual's newer elements of touristification, asking whether such developments conflict with the roles the festivities have traditionally served to those who practise them.

The Bulgarian kukeri tradition

Arriving in Pernik by train, our carriage was full and its passengers all spill out in the same direction, moving along streets towards the centre. The closer we get, the more costumes we see – horns and furs, men stood in huge, padded suits made from the pelts of goats and sheep, strapping cowbell-laden belts around their waists. The sound of bells fills the air, rising above the anticipatory chatter.

The temperature is somewhere around freezing, and people drink against the cold. Stalls sell cups of hot mulled wine to the spectators; performers can occasionally be spotted sipping from hipflasks hidden in their costumes. The mood is electric though, the air smoky from a dozen barbecues, and accordion music seems to come from all directions at once.

Some performers are trying on masks now. Hooked noses, or beaks, or gnashing teeth – there seem to be an infinite number of ways to interpret the brief, but all are similarly monstrous. A kuker suddenly brushes past me in the crowd – his conical hood sways with every step, and what appears to be an actual severed goat's head is attached to the front where his face ought to have been.

Everywhere, meanwhile, death stalks the crowds. Each troupe has one – figures clad completely in black, manifestations of death personified, that dance and taunt the living.

(Author's field notes, 2017)

Bulgaria's kukeri rituals are held during the 'Unclean Days' (from the Nativity of Christ until Epiphany, or Yordanovden, on January 6); in the first week of Lent; and in the week after Shrovetide (Sirni Zagovezni) leading to Saint Theodore's Day (Todorovden) – all traditionally considered to be times when demons and unclean forces are free to wander the earth (Mihailova, 2002). There are two components to the tradition, beginning with house-to-house visits by a group of costumed performers. This may take the form of a Bulgarian wedding party: a bride and groom (historically, both played by men) and a troupe of dancing monsters following as attendants. These visitors will playfully torment the occupants of each home, who must congratulate the newly married couple and give money to bring good luck. Later, the main ritual is traditionally performed in a town or village square with the kukeri gathering to enact a mummers' play depicting the death of the king, the sowing of seeds, a wedding and rebirth.

Scholars have traced the tradition to the Thracian era (early Bronze Age to 1st century C.E.) (Frazer, 1920; Zlatkovskaia, 1968; Fol, 2004), and it has since evolved alongside Thracian, Greek and Roman cultural influences to create a uniquely Bulgarian practice that preserved 'pagan' elements even after the country's Christianisation in the 9th century (Fol, 1991). Aspects of the ritual are compared to the rites of Dionysus as practised in Ancient Greece, in which revelry, chaos and the symbolic defeat of winter play a central role, via ritual drama.

In 1396–1878, the Ottoman Empire occupied Bulgaria, during which time many cultural practices – both Christian and secular – were suppressed or altered as Bulgarians were pressured to conform to the culture and religion of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, the kukeri rituals persisted in towns and villages, becoming a vehicle for the preservation and reinvigoration of community identities (Creed, 2011) – even as a repository for a sense of Bulgarian-ness. After Bulgaria's 19th-century liberation from Ottoman rule, these folk traditions were celebrated as part of the National Revival movement (Agoston-Nikolova, 2008). Post-WWII, the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) continued to promote national folk traditions, music and festivals as part of a broader cultural revival aimed at fostering national unity. In 1966, the Surva Festival launched at Pernik (a mining town 40 km from the capital), welcoming kukeri troupes from around the country to perform in one mass event. From 1985, it became an international festival and opened to foreign troupes. However, socialist-era kukeri performances could sometimes be sanitised, or reinterpreted, for example, by emphasising the ritual's joyous, life-affirming aspects while downplaying the macabre, dark, mystical and religious elements (Creed, 2011).

Agoston-Nikolova (2008) finds tension between the spontaneous and improvisational tendency of folk traditions versus the more structured and ‘purified’ nature of government-sanctioned music and festivals during Communist times. Prior to WWII, she notes how rural Bulgarian folk music had a multi-ethnic character, combining influences from Romania, Ukraine, Poland, Greece and Hungary, as well as Roma Gypsy and Jewish traditions. However, Agoston-Nikolova (2008, p.7), explains that in the 1950s, the communist state defined such town culture as ‘reactionary and bourgeois’, replacing it with an idealised version of folklore music that was more ‘authentically’ Bulgarian. In consequence, ‘great efforts were made not only to preserve the folklore tradition but also to purify it of contamination’ (Agoston-Nikolova, 2008, p.7). Following 1989 and the transition to democracy, the Surva International Festival of Masquerade Games continued – as did countless regional variants across the country, which preserved pre-socialist and pre-secular aspects of the ritual. There are practitioners of the tradition today who claim an uninterrupted heritage stretching from prehistory (Creed, 2011).



Figure 1.2 Incarnation of death, alongside another performing character from the same troupe. Pernik, Bulgaria (January 2015). Photograph by the author.

Kukerovden and its symbols

Many groups from across the country are performing here in Pernik – more than 5,000 performers, according to organisers. The roads are closed, spectators held back behind barriers, as one troupe after other parades through the streets. They are heading for the main square, where each group in turn will give their rendition of the ancient ritual.

A group from the south of Bulgaria is performing now. The main event is similar to the mummers' passion plays, though performed with more movement and music, and at street level rather than on a stage. There is a king, and a young couple, attended by rowdy kukers in colourful sequined masks. They act out a bawdy pantomime for the crowds – after the king blesses the marriage, the groom then impregnates his bride (played as comedy, with men in both roles). Around them the kukeri prance and spin, clacking wooden swords together or waving red-tipped, phallic staffs. They laugh and roar, and jab at the crowd with pitchforks, while the troupe's musicians play a lively tune on accordion, drums, and kaval (a Bulgarian wind instrument).

Two of the kukeri get yoked to a wooden plough, to be comically whipped by the ploughman. As they plough imaginary furrows, the king rides behind in a chariot (actually a wooden prop carried by men hidden inside – instead of wheels we see four pairs of boots), and casts seeds across the field. He is then struck down by a kuker with a weaving spindle, and the character of death lowers him to the ground, claiming him. The kukeri then gather around the dead king's body, pulling out handfuls of sausages made to look like guts, which they toss at startled spectators.

By now the bride is ready to give birth – his dress is bulging, and when a kuker strikes him across the stomach a rag doll pops out between his legs. New life arrives, the king rises up from his grave, death is banished; the ritual is complete. The crowds applaud enthusiastically, this troupe bows and then they leave the arena making way for the next village's performance.

(Author's field notes, 2017)

The main ritual occurs on 'Kukerovden' (Day of the Kukeri) and reflects a pre-Christian worldview centred around the cyclical nature of life and death: a symbolic play of resurrection and renewal. It is performed to banish evil spirits while ensuring a bountiful harvest to come, therefore serving both apotropaic and agricultural purposes for the community. It may also have served roles in socialising early communities, as the performances mimic and thus preserve traditional wedding rituals, as well as detailing important skills such as ploughing and weaving (Mihailova, 2002).

The costumes and performances vary across regions. In the Rhodope Mountains, kuker masks and costumes are often simpler, made from materials like wool and wood; in the southern

Thracian plains, costumes can be elaborate and incorporate painted masks and taxidermied parts of animals, real skulls, bones and horns; while traditions in western regions often feature more bombastic dancing, with louder vocalisations and bells. Nevertheless, all versions of the kukeri ritual embody the same deep relationship with totemism and animism and with the cult of the dead and serve as a means of social initiation (Mihailova, 2002). As reflected in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, the key characters in the play appear almost universal across traditions:

- The king, or tsar, who symbolises order and must be killed before rising again.
- The young lovers, who represent fertility and the youthful energies of new life.
- A priest, who accompanies the troupe as a spiritual authority combining both Christian and pagan influences. They bless the performers and crowd according to the Orthodox tradition, splashing them with a sprig of box dipped in Holy water. In Muslim communities (e.g. in the regions closer to the Turkish border), an imam may feature instead.
- Death, personified throughout the rites as a lurking figure in black, frequently also with a black-painted face, representing inevitable mortality.

Beyond these near-universal archetypes, different regional variants may add their own further characters. For example, in Sushitsa, a village in the Karlovo region, the kukeri divide into two groups: the Belogashti, usually younger performers wearing white costumes with coloured tassels, symbolising goodness and purity; and the Badzhatsi, usually older performers dressed in goat fur who are more sinister in behaviour and stand for the chaotic forces of nature. The Sushitsa troupe also includes ‘Plashilki’ (scarecrows who carry bells and participate in the house visits), a dedicated ploughman and sower, and historical figures such as Borimechkata – a folk hero from this region who fought against the Ottomans during the 1876 ‘April Uprising’ (Startsi-Kukeri-Mummers, n.d.).

Central to every ritual is the death of the king, signifying the end of the year and paralleling similar folkloric motifs of the ‘sacrificed king’ or ‘dying god’ as are appearing in other ancient traditions, including those of the Greeks and Thracians (Frazer, 1920; Strahilov, 2022). Death is present throughout the ritual and in the form of animal furs, skulls and taxidermied bodies. These materials signify the blending of life and death, the crossing of human and animal worlds. Performers dressed in these suits take on animalistic or demonic characteristics, rolling on the ground, rubbing themselves in ashes and soot and harassing the

audience. These dark qualities are essential to the ritual, representing the forces of chaos that must be overcome to give way to new life (Zlatkovskaia, 1968). As such, the ritual performance allows for the domestication of death (Korstanje, 2011). Mihailova proposes that the members of the kukeri troupe are not in fact masked at all, but through the ritual they *become* these demonic forces:

The mythical consciousness [...] is syncretic and does not perceive all the personages discussed as being masked during the process of their metamorphoses [...] unlike the modern analytical consciousness, the mythical does not differentiate man from his clothing in the same way as it does not [differentiate] the fur of the wolf and the bear from the wolf itself and the bear itself (Mihailova, 2002. pp.294–297).

This was the view taken also by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church at various times throughout history, Mihailova (2002) notes, with Christian writings identifying the kukeri with the devil himself. Thus, Mihailova (2002) identifies the kukeri as beings that are non-social and Other to the community, coming from beyond the known world: the wandering souls of the sinful and unsocialised dead and marginal personages.

The kukeri as a rite of passage

Research on the kukeri ritual, in Bulgaria and beyond, has approached the tradition through lenses such as archaeology, sociology, ethnology and art criticism (Mihailova, 2002). For example, the continued practice of the kukeri ritual in the years since ‘the Changes’ has provided an insightful case study through which to examine broader themes of post-socialist (re)development. Indeed, in recent decades the practice has seen something of a revival, often framed within the context of post-socialist national identity reconstruction (Creed, 2011), wherein folk traditions like the kukeri provide a link to an older and more ancient version of Bulgarian culture and identity. Agoston-Nikolova (2008) notes that in the post-socialist era, the fragmentation of a clear and unifying political vision for Bulgaria has led to a stronger and more pronounced sense of regional self-awareness. On the other hand, it also led to an influx of foreign influences.

One interesting reading of the tradition is to consider the kukeri ritual as an initiation: a rural community's 'rite of passage' (Van Gennep, 1960), conducted within the liminal zone of a temporary festival ground. Foucault (2008) identified the festival as an example of a 'heterotopia' – that is, an 'Other place', a place of differing rules and status, which interrupts the apparent continuity and normality of everyday space. Herein, the boundaries of social norms are transgressed in zones broadly perceived as falling outside of known space, thus permitting a sense of the alternative (Topinka, 2010). Saldanha (2008) notes that heterotopias, in contrast to utopias, exist in the real world but allow for the temporary reordering of space and society. Scholars have subsequently investigated the heterotypic qualities of folk festivals, for example in Palestine (Yazbak, 2011), Italy (Howell, 2013) and Turkey (Karaosmanoglu, 2010). Wilks and Quinn (2016), meanwhile, propose a new conceptual framework for understanding folk festivals, namely, through the interlinking of social capital, cultural capital and heterotopia. In their study of two folk festivals in England and Ireland, they conclude:

[The] heterotopian concept of the festival as sacred space, with the stage as umbilicus, may be linked to the building of social capital; while it is suggested that both social capital and appropriate cultural capital are needed to gain full entry to the heterotopia (Wilks & Quinn, 2016, p.23).

The kukeri tradition also conforms to Bakhtin's (1968) understanding of a festival as a site of potential resistance, where social norms invert as mundane routine gives way to escapism, frivolity and play. Abrahams (1982) finds commonality between festival times and ritual times, as both can be characterised as fostering new interpretations of time and space, which contrast with the everyday norm. This liminality – and the overthrow of ordinary societal structures – may then give rise to a state of 'communitas', wherein members are free to assume new roles entirely removed from real-world social structures (Turner, 1982).

Ancient rituals in a modern world

I was struck by the variety of costumes on display; the materials ranging from thread and lace, ribbons and mirrors, to bones, horns and feathers. Each group represented a different town, a different regional tradition. There are awards for the best-dressed teams – and these days, the audience can cast their vote by text message.

Another symptom of the modern world creeps in, in the form of pop culture references: amongst the procession I spot a group of kukeri dressed as the popular animated Minions, a Guy Fawkes mask, and several different performers dressed as the cartoon ogre Shrek.

(Author’s field notes, 2017)

Bulgaria changed enormously over the course of the 20th century (from a rural agrarian society towards rapid urbanisation and industrialisation), and it continues to change in the 21st. The effects of Westernisation have included the ‘hybridisation of Bulgarian folk music’ as it began embracing and responding to styles ranging from ‘formerly forbidden Turkish/Oriental elements’ to American hip-hop (Agoston-Nikolova, 2008, p.12). The kukeri tradition is subject now to far more tourist interest than has previously been the case. In particular, the macabre elements of the kukeri rituals, including their death symbolism and use of animal bones and skulls, tend to become the remarkable focal points within this new touristic context. However, if the ritual responds to such demands, it raises important questions about the commodification of tradition and the value of authenticity. There may be value in considering this ancient ritual through the more modern academic lens of dark events studies (e.g. Kennell & Šuligoj, 2024): a framework which provides tools for effectively analysing the relationships between tourism, events and the authentic preservation of sensitive cultural elements (Table 1.1).

Conceptual areas	Associated topics
Presence of death	Non-human death Death symbolism Actual death
Commercialisation	Consumption Authenticity Management

Experiences	Participants Audiences Emotions
Deviant behaviour	Harm Criminality Violence
Public sphere	Memory work National identity Politics
Approaches	Cross-cultural Multi-disciplinary Typologies

Table 1.1 A research framework for the analysis of dark events. Adapted from Kennell and Šuligoj (2024)

Symbolic darkness is ever present in the kukeri ritual and, indeed, described as integral to the performance (Zlatkovskaia, 1968). Those attending the festival might be considered perhaps as dark tourists (see Korstanje, 2011), a framework which in turn provides a useful way to ‘discuss the wider fascination we appear to have with our own mortality and the fate of others’ (Hartmann et al., 2018). However, Kennell and Šuligoj (2024) note that a dark tourism perspective necessarily presumes tourism supply, whereas in relation to sensitive heritage, or in less-developed countries, the question remains open as to whether tourism is even desirable. Added to this, Bulgaria understands and approaches darker themes differently from Western tourism norms. Mileva (2018, p.35) suggests Western dark tourism studies build on a ‘completely different conceptual basis’ to Bulgarian attitudes towards dark places and events, since in Bulgaria, ‘tourism is mostly linked with recreation, leisure, and entertainment, while the dark places/sites related to death and [suffering] are mostly linked to religion, historical, or political heritage’. By that logic, the kukeri rites may still have a personal and cultural significance which cannot be appreciated by visiting tourists, and the commodification of this heritage for tourism could subsequently be considered undesirable.

We might then ask, for whose gaze are these modern rituals performed? It is interesting, as a spectator to these rituals, to consider them through the constructed and curated perspective of the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990) – a paradigm which tends to confirm tourist expectations (Turner et al., 2005) and which is at least in part co-constructed by tour operators and experience marketers (Goss, 1993). In tandem, modern tourists seek deeper contact and embodiment with the places they visit (Thrift, 1999), as well as a desire for (so-perceived)

authenticity (MacCannell, 1999). Winter (2010) applies similar questions to the phenomenon of ‘performing the past’, that is to say, when scripts, rituals or ceremonies originally intended to bind together a social group or to practise collective memory are conducted now purely for the benefit of cultural outsiders. In this way the tourist gaze may facilitate ‘the transformation of the global system of attractions into an enormous set of mirrors to serve the narcissistic needs of dull egos’ (MacCannell, 2001, p.26) – a problem that Nicholson-Lord (2002) describes as ‘staged authenticity’. It has been warned that for some communities, tourism can in fact pose a threat to uniqueness and community identity (Caust, 2018), while the ““commodification” and “museumisation” of local art forms and cultures for tourist consumption often violate the spiritual and aesthetic concerns of the practitioners’ (Sudheer, 2014, pp.6–7). Still, Waterman (1998) notes that festivals are by nature highly authored landscapes and, through their organisation and production, are inevitably shaped by power relations. This was no doubt true for the centralised Surva Festival under the Bulgarian Communist Party. Creed (2011) notes that in their process of purifying against foreign influences, Bulgaria’s Europeanisation effort took on ethnic and racial power frameworks. As such, Strahilov (2022) argues there remains an ‘adopted Eurocentric imperative of modernisation that dominates, organises and orders the Bulgarian heritage canon, hierarchising its constituent layers’.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the kukeri tradition in Bulgaria, with a particular focus on its darker themes and symbolism, within the framework of dark event studies. It considered these festive events as temporary liminal spaces, heterotopic in nature (Foucault, 2008), and wherein participants and performers might attain states of *communitas* (Turner, 1982). Not only did the ancient precursors of these rituals bind together communities and initiate their members in ‘rites of passage’ (Van Gennep, 1960), but they also served a role of ‘domesticating death’ (Korstanje, 2011). By enacting death and the defeat of evil forces, the community symbolically cleanses itself of past transgressions and prepares for the new year. In this sense, the kukeri rituals serve as a way for communities to confront their mortality in a controlled and symbolic manner. The macabre elements of the performances, from the costumes to the narratives, integrate death into the social and natural order, while providing a safe community space to engage with death, transforming it from a source of fear into a

necessary part of the cycle of life. Moreover, particularly during the five centuries of Ottoman occupation, such communal rites may have provided an important wellspring of national identity, thus maintaining a shared sense of Bulgarian-ness (Creed, 2011).

Amongst conceptual areas for focus in the field of dark event studies, Kennell and Šuligoj (2024) highlight the themes of ‘presence of death’, ‘deviant behaviour’ and ‘commercialisation’. Death is ever present in the kukeri ritual (Zlatkovskaia, 1968), while deviant behaviour forms another aspect of the festivities, as masked performers taunt and harass the crowds and enter homes without invitation. Indeed, the performances, including the recurrent theme of men dressed in women’s clothing, represent deviations from what was the social norm, made permissible within this sacred and liminal space (Wilks & Quinn, 2016). On the topic of commercialisation, the chapter asked whether the development of the kukeri tradition for touristic consumption might conflict with the roles it has traditionally served to the communities who practise it. While the resurgent popularity of these rituals has provided a channel for post-socialist national identity reconstruction (Creed, 2011), at the same time, it threatens alteration by incoming foreign influences, in step with Bulgaria’s increasing contemporary globalisation (Agoston-Nikolova, 2008). This remains an area for further research in which event scholars might look at the differing effects of commercialisation or modernisation seen at traditional rural festivities, as compared to the much larger and more visible gatherings at Pernik. Nevertheless, the kukeri ritual has ever been in a state of evolution, responding to the influx of Christian and Muslim cultures, as well as secular socialist society. Thus, the ritual serves Bulgarian communities best not as a static reproduction of ancient history, but as a community bonding ritual that continually adapts to best serve that community.

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