

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Anelia A. Kassabova, PhD

Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

on the materials submitted for the competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field of study 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Sciences (Bulgarian Ethnology, Folk medicine)

Department “Ethnology”, Faculty of History, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Only one candidate - Assistant Professor Dr. Violeta Kalinova Kotseva-Popova - has submitted documents for participation in the competition for an Associate Professor announced by "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of History (State Gazette of 28.06.2022). The materials and documents of Dr. Violeta Kotseva-Popova meet the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for the Application of the Law of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Publications from the time after obtaining the assistant professorship (2011) are taken into account for the selection procedure: 2 monographs, one of which is based on the dissertation, but revised and expanded; 7 edited volumes; 21 publications in academic collections and series, two of which are co-authored. Of importance are also her contributions to textbooks (3) and teaching materials (3).

Dr. Violeta Kotseva-Popova has gained extensive project experience - in the period from 2011 to 2022 she has participated in 11 collective research projects, two of which she has led. She participates in responsible bodies at the national level - National Commission "Living Human Treasures", National Council for Intangible Cultural Heritage at UNESCO. She is a member of the editorial board of the Yearbook of “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Faculty of History, and the journal “Tereni”.

Dr. Kotseva-Popova is a university lecturer of high standing, she teaches 7 independent lectures at the Department of Ethnology, and was the academic supervisor of two dissertations; in two periods (2013-2015 and 2016-2018) she was an academic mentor in the "Student Practices"; in 2021-2022 she was the supervisor of the "Seminar for PhD students and young scholars: academic careers". A competent and responsible ethnologist, Dr. Kotseva-Popova has been invited as a guest lecturer to the University of Riga, Latvia, and to the University of Regensburg, Germany, on the topic "Folk Medicine in Bulgaria in the Early 21st Century".

The publications submitted for the competition are devoted to important and diverse scientific topics. In general, several thematic areas can be distinguished: Gifts, Mobility and Identities, Sport and Identity, Teaching Ethnology and Building Skills for Working in Intercultural Educational Settings. Dr. Kotseva-Popova's main interests are in the field of medical anthropology: The two monographs - *"Happy Bath!" An ethnological look at the hygiene of Bulgarians*. Sofia

2012 and the habilitation thesis *Healers and Healing Practices in the Early 21st Century. An ethnological study*. Sofia, University Publishing House "Sv. Kl. Ohridski, 2022, and 11 publications in academic journals.

With the monograph *Healer and Healing Practices...* Dr. Kotseva-Popova aims to show "the mechanisms by which traditional and academic biomedicine manage to co-exist and often complement each other under conditions of synchronous parallel existence." (p. 8) The time frame of the study spans the decades of the so-called transition from 1989 to the present, focusing on healers and healing practices in the early twenty-first century. Several groups of healers are discussed – *bayachki*, fortune tellers (*gledachki*), healers who influence medical conditions using their energy resources (*energy healers, energetitsi*).

The study is ethnological and based on field research conducted mainly in the period 2014 - 2019 in a broad regional spectrum of Strandzha, Sakar, the Central (Middle) Rhodopes, the Eastern Balkan Mountains, regions in the north-east, north-west and central-west of Bulgaria. As Dr. Kotseva-Popova aptly puts it, she moved as a researcher "along the paths of 'health nomadism'" (p. 24). On these restless paths, the author has spoken to over 80 healers, observed and recorded their rituals and practices; her field research is also a "participant observation". An observation that respects the privacy of the interviewees, which is reflected in the confidently shared narratives. Dr. Kotseva-Popova's decision to anonymise her interviewees despite their consent to the recordings is justified.

The book is divided into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion, the transitions are fluid, the author presents complex folk healing practices, identifies the most important elements in the life stories of healers, fortune tellers, energy healers. In her analyses, the author considers the categories of gender, age, social status, ethnicity and highlights the importance of religiosity. In this way, she is able to work out the consistent features of the healer image: Conservatism, but also dynamics. Traditional healers maintain the sacredness and mystery of their practices, but at the same time, determined by the need to be an alternative to biomedicine, they develop new knowledge and skills.

A separate chapter is devoted to religious acts and magical practices. The author outlines the different dogmatic rationales for health and healing in Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam, traces the interweaving of elements from different streams of Christianity and Islam. In doing so, she refers to leading scholars of religion and the terms they have introduced, such as *alternative religiosity, religious expertise, secular worship, utilitarian sacredness* and others, to highlight the special relationship to religion and faith in healers' narratives. This connection is evident in the choice of words, places, images and symbols, which often differ from the canonical dimensions of religion.

The analyses flow into an engagingly written narrative in which Dr. Kotseva-Popova makes numerous "digressions" - on childhood as a historical category and the development of attitudes towards children; on the meaning of the written word; on the *heap ritual (gramada)*; on care and caring profession, etc. Each "digression" also includes a historiographical overview and references to theories. Of course, it is difficult to achieve completeness in such an approach, but

there is merit in broadening the scope and drawing attention to the complex context of folk healing practices.

In the final chapter, *Traditional and Scientific Medicine in Modernity - Competitors or Necessary Neighbours*, Dr. Kotseva-Popova discusses the socio-economic and political conditions that determine the turn towards certain patterns of response with selectively chosen elements of traditional culture. According to the author, the "crisis situation", the health reforms and the transition to a health insurance system in which health becomes a commodity, lead to a "shift from the world of scientific medicine to that of folk medicine and vice versa" (p. 158).

This chapter is interesting in that it focuses on the change in attitude towards traditional medicine since the 1970s, thanks to the World Health Organisation and the recommendations adopted at the 1978 Alma Ata Conference to pay attention to traditional medical practices and possibly incorporate parts of them into national health systems. This is where my recommendation comes in: The 1978 WHO conference was held in the leading socialist country, the USSR, the socialist countries were members of the WHO, they were actively involved in its activities. It is an advantage to put the issues in a global perspective, but it also implies a more differentiated view of the socialist period. Dr. Kotseva-Popova has researched health policy in depth in the first half of the twentieth century, the habilitation thesis draws a dense picture of folk healers and alternative practitioners in the last three decades. Turning to the second half of the twentieth century will fill the 'gap' that has arisen and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding, rather than providing a blanket definition of the 'communist regime'. In her research, Dr Kotseva-Popova provides a number of examples, including the well-chosen case studies, which contain numerous clues for a more differentiated analysis of developments in the field of folk medicine and the politics and attitudes toward folk healers during the period of state socialism.

Of course, this is only a recommendation and in no way diminishes the contributions of Dr. Kotseva-Popova, who addresses important research questions, points out their complexity, expands knowledge, provokes debate and stimulates further research.

Dr. Kotseva-Popova's research is original, at a high scientific level, meets the requirements for a habilitation. Taking into account both the scientific publications and the teaching and organizational activities of Dr. Violeta Kalinova Kotseva-Popova, I confidently vote positively for her and strongly recommend the same to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury of the Department of Ethnology, Faculty of History, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Sofia, 10.10.2022

Anelia Kassabova