

OPINION

by PhD Valentina Georgieva Ganeva-Raycheva, Associate Professor at
the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum –
the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
for the dissertation thesis for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree
“PhD Doctor” in: field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal sciences
Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, doctoral program
Folklore Studies

Author: *Dimitar Ivanov Vasilev*

Topic: *Institutional Development and Musealization of Folk Culture in Contemporary Times (On the Example of Crafts and Organized Craftsmanship in Bulgaria)*

Scientific supervisor: *Assoc. Prof. Violeta Kalinova Kotseva, PhD*

1. General presentation of the procedure and the doctoral student. By order No. RD-38-50/02.02.2026 of the Rector of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, I am appointed as a member of the scientific jury for ensuring a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic “Institutional Development and Musealization of Folk Culture in Contemporary Times (On the Example of Crafts and Organized Craftsmanship in Bulgaria)” for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences, doctoral program “Ethnology”. The author of the dissertation is Dimitar Ivanov Vasilev, a doctoral student in an independent form of study at the Department of “Ethnology” of the Faculty of History with a scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Violeta Kotseva, PhD.

The set of materials presented by Dimitar Vassilev is in accordance with the Regulations on the conditions and procedure for acquiring scientific degrees and for holding academic positions at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and includes all necessary documents.

D. Vassilev is a graduate of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” – BA in Ethnology (2007), MA in Cultural Studies and Manager of Cultural Heritage (2013). In the period 2008 – 2017 he was a curator at the Ethnographic Museum at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with the Ethnographic Museum – BAS. Since 2017, the doctoral student has been working at the National Museum of History in Sofia, where he is currently the head of the department “History of Bulgaria during the Revival, 18th - 19th centuries”. Since 2018, he has been a part-time lecturer at the National Academy of Arts. In December 2023, he was enrolled as a PhD student in an independent form of study at the Department of Ethnology of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

D. Vassilev's dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters (*Institutionalization and Transformation of Crafts and Organized Crafts in Modern Times, Musealization of Folk Crafts. Development of Craftsmanship as Part of Open-air Exhibitions, Institutional Development and Musealization of Folk Craftsmanship. Transformation of Organized Crafts (Based on the Example of the Town of Troyan)*), conclusion, bibliography and appendix. The total volume of the work is 359 pages, of which 313 pages are author's text and 46 pages are appendix. The bibliography includes 266 sources, of which 240 are titles in Cyrillic and 26 are titles in Latin. Separately, normative acts and documents, archival materials and Internet sources related to the issue are cited. The appendix contains 92 illustrations from archives of masters, from the personal archive of the doctoral student or from Internet sources, on topics developed in the dissertation. A declaration of authorship and originality of the results, as well as the correctness of the bibliographical citations, is presented.

The PhD student declares 16 publications on the topic of the dissertation, of which 3 are in print, made in the period from 2011 to the present. In total, D. Vasilev is the author of 34 publications, is the compiler of 1 thematic collection (Prof. Marin Drinov Publishing House, 2018), 2 exhibition catalogs (2020 and 2024) and one guidebook (2023) of the National History Museum in Sofia.

2. Relevance of the topic, knowledge of the problem, research methodology. The subject of the dissertation research is “the institutionalization of craftsmanship and the new roles and functions that crafts and craftsmen acquire through cooperation, the creation of a centralized branch organization, a modern market economy, as well as the transformation of some of them into cultural heritage and an object of museum exhibition” (p. 6). The processes of change, their effects, as well as the valorization of traditional knowledge and skills related to crafts have not been the subject of a comprehensive and systematic study and have not been fully studied from an ethnological perspective in our country. The problem is multifaceted – in addition to cultural specifics, there are political, economic, educational and social dimensions. In the dissertation work, all these dimensions are analyzed in a historical and contemporary perspective.

What is happening to traditional craftsmanship in Bulgaria? Why do some crafts die out and others survive? How do household activities become crafts? How do local crafts become emblematic at the national level? How do they become cultural heritage? What is the place of modern craftsmanship in the country's market economy? Can it be said that craftsmanship is a “counterpoint to mass production”? The author provides answers to these and other similar questions in his dissertation, consistently tracing the transformations in crafts, craft production and organized craftsmanship.

With the example of crafts, D. Vasilev joins the great dialogue about heritage, a question that has occupied scholars in recent decades. Despite the growing number of publications on this issue, it is still a challenge for researchers. This is probably due to the complex nature of heritage – its constructed and dynamic character. The valuation of local cultural resources and their valorization require adequate policies and actions so that they can actually become a resource for local development and improving the quality of life. Important problems that have engaged the attention of scientists recently.

The chosen methodology for gathering information is adequate and allows for a dense description. The field study was carried out using classical ethnological methods. It is based on interviews (with craftsmen and their assistants, with relatives and direct heirs, with museum specialists and administrative personnel), direct observations and the study of individual cases (case studies). It covers a large number of respondents in different parts of the country and abroad and is the result of many years of interest. Repeated observations in some places and repeated interviews with some of the respondents allow the doctoral student to register possible changes in their assessment of their experiences and daily life as craftsmen. Archives (personal and public), regulatory documents, voluminous scientific literature, publications by museum and other specialists, publications on the Internet were studied. I highly appreciate the diverse empirical base with which D. Vassilev works.

The research methodology includes historiographic analysis, interpretative analysis and a biographical approach. Good knowledge and understanding of the source base and research on the issue (by ethnologists, art historians, artists, etc.) is demonstrated. The chosen methodology allows achieving the set goal and objectives, as well as arguing the thesis formulated in the dissertation.

3. Evaluation of the dissertation work and contributions. The dissertation work is distinguished by a clear, logical and coherent structure. The goal and tasks of the research, the thesis that will be proven, the lines that will be followed are very well formulated. The structuring of the individual chapters makes a good impression - each of them contains the problem that will be considered, the approaches and the empirical basis on which the reasoning will be based, the development of the analysis, deepening of the reflections with a precise study of specific cases and finally a summary. As a very appropriate solution for the purposes of the study, I accept the third chapter, in which the transformations in organized craftsmanship, institutional development and the musealization of folk crafts are examined in detail using the example of Troyansko.

I evaluate D. Vasilev's dissertation as a contributing study to ethnology. It is based on mastered theory and empiricism. It impresses with the maturity and depth of the researched issues, with the author's ability to analyze social and cultural processes, placing them in the context of political realities.

The undoubted merit of the work is the broad historical and cultural context of the study, the threads drawn from the 19th century to the present day, although the main analysis covers the period from the mid-20th century to the first two decades of the 21st century. Practices

characteristic of traditional society are highlighted, transformations during the creation and consolidation of the national state, processes during the period of state socialism, during the transition to democratic rule and to the present day. D. Vassilev convincingly shows the stable and changing meanings of the researched object, changes in craft institutions and crafts, in training in a given craft, in its practice, in its social significance. Models of the transformations of crafts are derived.

Another merit of the dissertation research is the multi-layered analysis, the tracing of changes in crafts and organized craftsmanship at three levels – through state policies and institutions, through the fate of certain crafts, through the personal stories and experiences of masters practicing a specific craft. Through the focus on individual cases, the doctoral student goes into detail about the reflection of the processes that bind the market, craft, art and cultural heritage in the period after the democratic changes, and highlights life strategies for maintaining a given craft.

I highly appreciate the analyses that reveal the factors behind the changes in crafts and craft production during the years of state socialism. The effects of the functioning of crafts in a new environment through a centralized craft organization are shown. The circumstances for the vitality of some crafts in a different form are highlighted. Accurate observations are made on the combination of inherited forms, techniques, aesthetics and commercial development towards the production of goods for market production. The processes of transformation of some crafts into folk artistic crafts are highlighted, as well as their transformation into folk art through the prism of applied and decorative art. The special focus on pottery and the production of ceramic products gives the author the opportunity to present local centers with traditions in this production (Busina, Gabrovo, Troyan) and their different fate over the years.

An important merit of the work is the consistent tracking of cultural policies and the effects of turning some crafts into an element of the cultural heritage of Bulgarians, into a marker of national identity in the context of different political regimes and important changes in Bulgarian society. Through in-depth analyses of applied cultural policies and strategies for adapting to changes, the doctoral student reveals how “symbolic and utilitarian values are combined in the invention of survival mechanisms in different functional and role spheres”, how the practice of valued knowledge and skills, transmitted through generations, becomes a living heritage. I highly appreciate the second chapter, which offers valuable observations on the processes of museification of “folk crafts” and the possibilities for their development as part of outdoor exhibitions. Using the examples of the Regional Ethnographic Open-Air Museum “Eter” and the Open-Air Museum “Glentleiten” in Bavaria, the author presents policies and practices through which these institutions “provide a new path for the development of craftsmanship in a specific but also controlled environment, which also determines different characteristics and transformations of technological processes and craft production.”

D. Vasilev convincingly shows that the construction of heritage and its valorization is not a short-term process, it is not a given, static in time, but a dynamic structure; a process that is conditioned by many factors, requires targeted policies and management. If we move away from the specific example of crafts and think on a larger scale, we can summarize that this process is successful if and when it rests on three important pedestals. The first is the identification of specific cultural resources, peculiar reservoirs of memory that contain and activate “memories” of materialized human activity and the way it is organized, of living features of human knowledge, expressed in oral traditions, practices, arts, preserved and transmitted through generations. The second includes a concept and a set of tools for building and managing knowledge based on the valued cultural resources. The third pedestal is the skillful use of these cultural resources for the purposes of the future, for the transfer of knowledge and for the formation of joint innovations and identity. In his research on crafts and their valorization as a living heritage, the doctoral student presents successful examples of managing traditional knowledge and skills with a view to the future.

I recommend the publication of the work. It will undoubtedly arouse wide interest due to its high cognitive value. Using the example of crafts and artisan production, D. Vasilev also highlights important processes in Bulgarian society and culture from the second half of the 20th century to the present day.

Notes and recommendations. I believe that the title of the dissertation study could not have included the concept of “folk culture”. The author notes in the first sentence of the introduction that it contains convention. In the second paragraph he uses “so-called traditional culture” as a synonym. What is meant by folk culture – the culture of unalienated labor, of the patriarchal village, of pre-industrial society? However, it is not a single culture, but has local/regional characteristics. It is characterized by the indissoluble unity of aesthetic/artistic and utilitarian functions, it is distinguished by specifics in the socialization, transmission and dissemination of knowledge and skills. Craftsmanship is a specialized labor that is semi-professional at least in the pre-industrial period. If the concept of “folk culture” is not specified and defined in the dissertation, it is not necessary to include it in the title, especially since the subject of the study is the transformations in traditional crafts and craft production in the period from the second half of the 20th century to the first two decades of the 21st century. In the future publication of the dissertation research, I believe that the first part of the title should be reformulated or dropped. In my opinion, it is more appropriate to replace “folk culture” with “traditional knowledge and skills”. This way, the author will actually be able to place his reflections on crafts and craftsmanship in the broader context of institutionalization, valuation and museumification of preserved knowledge and skills from the pre-industrial period of Bulgaria. Uses of folklore texts and local cultural traditions with a view to the idea of constructing the national were registered as early as the Revival. They were recognized as an important resource for constructing national identity and recognizable cultural identity. The processes of inventing high cultural spheres, which draw resources from folklore culture as a long-standing tradition with local distribution, continue with different rhythms and ideological orientations in post-liberation Bulgaria and during state socialism. Certain forms of cultural expression, certain skills become the object of state protection, lose their locality and become supra-local forms, emblems of national cultural identity, and their aesthetic function becomes dominant at the expense of the utilitarian one.

I recommend that in future publications of the dissertation research, reflections related to two main cultural policies of Bulgaria for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage be included: the system “Living Human Treasures – Bulgaria” and the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which have been implemented since 2006.¹ The spheres in which this heritage is manifested are: oral traditions and forms of expression, performing arts; social customs, rituals and festive events; knowledge and customs relating to nature and the universe; knowledge and skills related to traditional crafts.² A look at the elements entered over the years in the National Representative List of the NICH will enrich the examples and reflections on valued traditional crafts. As good examples of heritage management with a view to the future in the Regional Ethnographic Open-Air Museum “Etar” (chapter two, item 5), the candidacies prepared by the institution for masters working there (*Hristo Marinov – master mutafchiya at the “Etar” Museum*³ and *The Sweet Aroma of Heritage. Boyan Minchev – Master Shekerdzhiya*), which have been successfully entered into the National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (the first in 2022, and the second in 2024), can be cited. The cultural policies for the preservation of the ICH reflect an important trend in the last twenty years, which is expressed in the rehabilitation of the local and the important role of local communities in the appreciation, preservation and transmission of knowledge and skills passed down through generations.

The note on the term “folk culture” is not essential for D. Vasilev’s full-fledged study of crafts and their institutions. The recommendations are suggestions for enriching the observations in future publication of the dissertation. In his study, D. Vasilev convincingly proves the thesis that crafts (as well as other knowledge and skills passed down through generations) are instrumentalized by different political regimes. He highlights how, in accordance with the dominant ideology, certain

¹ Note No. 275 on p. 166 needs corrections.

² In the National Register of NCN, traditional crafts, household activities and livelihoods are under No. 5 in the national nomenclature of activities. Traditional crafts and household activities include the following activities: clay processing, metal processing, traditional construction practices, stone, wood, leather processing, making products from plant materials, from textile materials, making and maintaining products by combining materials, painting with ancient techniques and natural dyes, making objects for rituals and holidays.

³ The nomination of Hr. Marinov is mentioned on p. 166.

policies are formed and implemented that change the natural development of crafts. He shows that the changes are multifaceted, encompassing the forms of association of craftsmen, training in a given craft, the production process and the realization of craft products. It analyzes in detail how the imposition of certain aesthetic criteria, the addition of new values, new functions affects the fate of traditional crafts – some die out (not only because of the processes of modernization and industrialization), others become folk artistic crafts, folk art, national emblems of Bulgarian culture. Slow, manual and authorial production as a counterpoint to mechanized standard production is valued and museumified.

There have been 16 publications on the topic of the dissertation in peer-reviewed publications (scientific journals and thematic collections), of which 3 are in print. The period of publication (from 2011 to the present) and their number are evidence of the doctoral student's long-term interest in the issue. The abstract reflects the content and results of the dissertation research. I note as an omission that there are no contributions listed at the end of the abstract. No plagiarism was found. The dissertation contains original results from studies conducted by the author. The sources used and the results of other scientists have been correctly cited.

In conclusion, the dissertation thesis contains scientific results that meet the requirements of the Act on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADSRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the ADSRB and the relevant Regulations of St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University. Dimitar Ivanov Vasilev possesses good theoretical knowledge and professional skills in ethnology studies, demonstrates qualities and skills for independent scientific research. The dissertation thesis “Institutional Development and Musealization of Folk Culture in Contemporary Times (On the Example of Crafts and Organized Craftsmanship in Bulgaria)” meets the criteria for dissertation research – it is dedicated to a current issue and a significant topic that has not been fully developed in ethnology, is based on a personally conducted field study with adequate methods for collecting information, her own research perspective was found, defended convincingly.

I confidently give a positive assessment of the conducted research, presented in the dissertation and the abstract, and I propose to the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree “PhD” to Dimitar Ivanov Vasilev in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, doctoral program *Ethnology*.

13.03.2026

Opinion drawn up by:
(Assoc. Prof. Valentina Ganeva-Raycheva, PhD)