
MILA SANTOVA AND STELLA NENOVA

The Bulgarian cultural center known as a chitalishte ("reading room"), a characteristic phenomenon in Bulgaria, is an institution closely connected with the community in whose parameters it is created, functions, and develops. Most often the community has a local one. Already at the time of its appearance as a cultural and educational institution, the historical fate of the chitalishte was closely connected with the community's spiritual and social life. As a phenomenon with a specific structure and presence in the life of the community, the chitalishte has been a focus of political, governmental, and research interest.

Keywords: *chitalishte, cultural center.*

V Bolgariji je kulturno središče, poznano pod imenom čitalnica, značilen fenomen, ustanova, ki je tesno povezana s skupnostjo, v kateri je nastala, deluje in se razvija. Navadno ima skupnost svojo krajevno čitalnico. Že ko je nastala kot kulturna in izobraževalna ustanova, je bila njena zgodovinska usoda tesno povezana z duhovnim in družbenim življenjem skupnosti. Kot pojav s posebno sestavo in vlogo v življenju skupnosti, je bila čitalnica deležna političnega, oblastnega in raziskovalnega interesa.

Ključne besede: *čitalnica, kulturno središče.*

THE APPEARANCE OF THE *CHITALISHTE*¹ STRUCTURE AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE COMMUNITY

The first cultural centers appeared in about the middle of the nineteenth century. Each of them was unique and at the same time was created in a typologically similar way to the others. The following cultural centers were established: Elenka and Kiril D. Avramovi (in Svishtov, 1852), Napredak (in Elena, 1863), Zora (in Ruse, 1864), Napredak

¹ In Bulgaria there already exists a rich literature on the factors and processes that determined the appearance, operation, and development of the *chitalishte*. Here we mostly selectively cite volumes that offer bibliographical references on this issue: Shishmanov 1924; Chilingirov 1930, 1934; Kiselkov 1932; Dvadeset i pet godini 1937; Kondarev 1950; Sirakov 1965; Todorov 1972; Kondarev et al. 1979; Pantev 1987; Lazarov 1987, 1990; Genchev 1988; Gavrilova 1994; Yosifova et al. 1996; Sirakov et al. 1997; Gavrilova et al. 2000; Iliev 2000. One can also add that today the unique institution of the Bulgarian *chitalishte* has attracted the interest of the international community. Proof of this is the report by the European expert council: "The cultural centers are put into the center of a possible outlook about the cultural policy in Bulgaria inasmuch as they represent a multifaceted and very democratic institutional form that is spread throughout the entire country . . . They can be an anchor for rediscovering the new civil society, and a center for developing local culture, which is actually a precondition for the development and flourishing of the national culture" (Landri 1997).

(in Shumen, 1869), Nadejda (in Veliko Tarnovo, 1869), and so on.² Two major social groups—the teachers and the tradesmen—were well represented among the founders of the Bulgarian cultural centers.

The appearance of cultural centers as a civic type of association in many Bulgarian towns of the 1860s and 1870s³ revealed a qualitatively new state of the social and cultural climate of the Bulgarian communities that existed within the Ottoman Empire. With the lack of an autonomous Bulgarian state with political and cultural institutions, the *chitalishte* was the form that largely assumed the responsibility of developing and manifesting the presence of the Bulgarian community.⁴ In historiographic literature, the *chitalishte* is most commonly associated with the social and cultural processes that shaped the Bulgarian national revival in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The general desire for education and organizing communities' own cultural life suggested the formation of civic awareness and confidence, which already at the early stages of cultural centers' existence laid the grounds of their institutional priorities,⁵ which have largely remained constant until today. From its beginning and over the entire period of its development, the *chitalishte* concentrated its activity on education, literacy, and culture. In the early period of its existence it mainly performed educational tasks. It offered easy and free-of-charge access to textbooks, other books, and periodicals, hosted library units, provided opportunities to hold lectures and talks, and supported the education of young Bulgarians outside the Ottoman Empire.⁶ It is especially notable that, already at the earliest stage of its existence, the *chitalishte* was perceived as a stable cultural institution with a specific mission for preserving and developing the traditional

² There is an enormous amount of literature dedicated to creating the various cultural centers in the various local communities. Almost every *chitalishte* has its own history, which has been the focus of separate investigations. See, for example, Kondarev 1950; Lazarov 1987; Panchev 2000.

³ Researchers have pointed out that the *chitalishte* first arose as a modern institution in Bulgarian cities. This is explained through certain characteristic traits of the city, its space, and its functions as an administrative, trade, and (not least of all) cultural center connected with intense economic exchange, with the spread of new ideas and knowledge about culture and the world (see Todorov 1995; Gavrilova et al. 2000; Santova 2001).

⁴ With respect to the appearance of the cultural centers, it is generally pointed out that their activities mainly sought to preserve Bulgarian identity within the Ottoman Empire (see Kondarev 1950; Sirakov 1965; Lazarov 1990).

⁵ In Bulgarian conditions the creation of civic institutions and associations appeared in the still amorphous Bulgarian society under the foreign domination. Scholars term this a “catching up” phenomenon. The Bulgarian national symbolic, mythology, intelligentsia, and institutional system preceded the new Bulgarian state, which was not its primary basis, but rather a result of these processes (Krasteva et al. 1995). For more about the institutional priorities of the *chitalishte* as one of the places where ideas connected with the national revival arose and developed, see Dvadeset i pet godini (1937); Devetdeset godini (1946); Kondarev 1950; Krasteva et al. 1995.

⁶ By means of the material and moral support of *chitalishte* activists in the early years of the institution and many young people were educated outside the Ottoman Empire, in Odesa, Bucharest, Brăila, and so on.

values of the local community. By defending and sustaining these values, the *chitalishte* succeeded in creating its authority and legitimacy (Iliev 2000). Gradually it almost entirely encompassed the social and cultural life of local communities and enabled them to sustain their contacts with other communities and with the world in general.



The independence movement of the 1870s is a very important part of self presentation. The Chitalishte Željava near Sofia. (Photo: J. Fikfak, 2010).

When state-based administration and professional institutions for education, culture, and art appeared after the independence of Bulgaria in 1878, the *chitalishte* did not lose its role and meaning, but remained at the center of the local community. This period was also marked by the presence of an enhanced communicative and inherent cultural center activity, which a number of studies define as amateur artistic work,⁷ but which turned the *chitalishte* into natural centers of the local communities. In Bulgaria, this phenomenon is connected in practice with the existence of an internal need for creative activity of wide social circles, and is large enough so as not to remain unnoticed. In order to more clearly understand its nature, the aforementioned function of preserving and developing traditional values of the local community must be complemented by another important function related to traditional values and traditional artistic values. Over its centuries-long existence in Bulgarian cultural space, the cultural center was the institution that assumed the responsibility for ensuring the transmission of these values to subsequent generations.

⁷ For more on the beginning and nature of amateur artistic work, see Chilingirov 1934; Dvadeset i pet godini (1937), Devetdeset godini (1946), Gavrilova 2000; Iliev 2000.

Thus, in the Bulgarian milieu and in the conditions of the market economy and the pervading urban modernity, the *chitalishte* as a voluntary civic association practically assumed the role and functions that had earlier belonged to the family in traditional culture. After the second half of the nineteenth century and through the entire twentieth century, the *chitalishte* has been not only a center of education and culture, but especially education in traditional local culture. It actually ensured and sustained the living environment for the transmission of knowledge in the community's traditional local culture, and thus turned into a civic center and a place for active communication between generations. In such a way, making use of the mechanisms characteristic of both traditional and civic societies, the *chitalishte* institutionally guaranteed the value transmission and continuity between them. Practically, it succeeded in making a successful adaptation between typologically different social mechanisms.

As a result of this, still today one can find extremely vivid variants of traditional Bulgarian culture in local forms, for whose preservation across time the *chitalishte* was crucial.

THE STRUCTURE OF *CHITALISHTE* AND THE STATE SYSTEM

After the independence of Bulgaria in 1878, the number of cultural centers on the cultural map of the country constantly increased. Until 1927, the state was largely indifferent to them as an institution, and there was no legal act to legitimize *chitalishte* as a social structure.⁸ Activity in each separate cultural center depended entirely and only on the application of internal regulations, in which the rules of governing and functioning were determined by the cultural center activists. This made the structure civic by nature. Its major characteristic was its complete autonomy from the state (Iliev 2000). After the passage of the Law on *Chitalishte* in 1927, the cultural centers had legal status; that is, they acquired legitimacy under the state's legislation.

The appointment of cultural centers' governing bodies and outlining the priorities in their activities depended on and were controlled only by the local communities (Gavrilova et al. 2000). Internal legislation governed the cultural centers' entire normative basis: their main regulations, rules for internal organization, the status and role of internal structures, rules for carrying out various activities and for signing contracts, joint activities with other organizations, and so on. This was an entirely independent internal organization that determined the autonomy of the *chitalishte* system.

From 1944 to 1989 the cultural centers underwent substantial transformations in terms of both structure and function.⁹ The policy of centralization that the commu-

⁸ For more on this issue, see Chilingirov 1934; Kondarev 1950; Yosifova et al. 1996; Iliev 2000.

⁹ For more about the changes in the structure and functions of the *chitalishte* in this period, see Gavrilova et al. 2000 and Iliev 2000.

nist state carried out led to deliberately making the *chitalishte* dependent on the state (Gavrilova et al. 2000; Iliev 2000). At that time the state system entirely subsidized the cultural centers and this had a beneficial effect. The material basis of the centers improved, steady library funds were created, creativity and innovative ideas among *chitalishte* activists were stimulated, and communication was created between different cultural centers and other institutions (schools, libraries, unions, museums, etc.).

After the political changes in 1989, the cultural centers faced a new situation. The entire state subsidy was cancelled. The latest Law on Chitalishte in 1996 determined the legal status of the cultural centers in the new conditions as a non-governmental organization. This law affirmed the center as traditional, self-governing cultural and educational associations with a non-profit goal and with a legal status (Iliev 2000). The financial support on behalf of the state was partial and was limited mainly to ensuring salaries for one or two permanent positions (a librarian and a secretary). However, cultural centers have the opportunity to submit projects to special national competitions and national funding (such as the national fund for culture), as well as to international organizations.



One of the central buildings in Asenovgrad is *Chitalishte Rodoljubie* (Photo: J. Fikfak, 2010).

CULTURAL CENTERS READING ROOMS TODAY AND THEIR ACTIVE ROLE IN CREATING A NATIONAL DATABASE OF TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES AND SKILLS

In the new conditions in recent years, the *chitalishte* rediscovered its place as a traditional cultural and educational center in the life of the local community. By means of successful projects at prestigious foundations and institutions, these centers are carrying out a series of new activities. They ensure access to the global network and information technologies in distant and underdeveloped regions of the country, they organize cultural life in the towns and villages, and they are becoming mediators between the local communities and globalized society. In addition, they are a constant source of information about important processes in the country along the path of its European integration (Gavrilova 2000). In today's conditions, the Bulgarian *chitalishte* continues to be a center of traditional cultural values, such as local and other Bulgarian folklore. The ideas that the cultural center is sharing and pursuing today correspond to its roots from the national revival period; that is, its role as a center for education and culture and a key point in the life of the local community. Over the many decades of its existence, the *chitalishte* has created and developed good skills for adapting successfully to the new processes of social transformation and local development, and at the same time defending the traditional values and ensuring the transmission of traditional skills to future generations. As a dynamic center of the community's social and cultural activity, the *chitalishte* sustains contacts and exchanges information with the living bearers of traditional knowledge and skills in the community.

These characteristics and the specifics of the Bulgarian cultural centers' activities turn out to be extremely important in light of appreciating the *chitalishte* and its network in Bulgaria as an important partner in creating national and regional databases of traditional activities and skills; for example, Living Human Treasures, Bulgaria (Santova et al. 2004).



Chitalishte today can have also other functions, such as the City Club (Grazhdanski Klub) in Plovdiv (Photo: J. Fikfak, 2010).

Article 12 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, accepted at the 32nd Session of UNESCO's General Conference in Fall 2003,¹⁰ explicitly states that with regard to the identification and preservation of intangible cultural heritage "each state/country . . . creates one or several databases of immaterial cultural heritage on its territory. These databases are subject to regular renewal" (Santova 2004: 124). Bulgaria is a country that has already created its database and the minister of culture has officially accepted it at the state level. The database is accessible online in Bulgarian and English (www.treasures.eubcc.bg).

What was especially important for the scholarly team working on the database was the present state of vitality of the tradition in different places, the living bearers of the tradition in various regions and sites, and how these act as transmitters of tradition to young generations. Here one naturally should note that the Bulgarian social sciences have almost two centuries of experience in collecting empirical material in immaterial cultural heritage. This means that the general picture of distribution and development of the practices connected with the various types and forms of immaterial cultural heritage is relatively familiar. Thus, for example, researchers are well aware what regions have two-part singing, what the centers of carpet-making are, where certain variants of the ritual system are practiced, and so on. With a stable enough basis of knowledge, based on long-term collection work and accumulation of archival material, what followed was to register the vitality of the separate traditional forms in the present. That is, from a certain point the task narrowed down and also became more complicated because snapshots of the tradition's vitality within the entire country had to be made within a short period of time.

In the course of this activity, partnership with the *chitalishte* network in the country was especially highlighted. The direct participation of the *chitalishte* as a traditional Bulgarian institution ensured the broad participation of communities, groups, and individuals, as suggested in Article 15 of the convention (Santova 2004: 125).

To receive the relevant information, the following procedure was necessary, which included the preparation of an inquiry list that (with the support of the ministry of culture) was distributed and reached the *chitalishte's* network throughout the entire country. It was preceded by the first national seminar with very wide participation (Peycheva 2002), which aimed to provide local people with practical guidelines for working with the inquiry list. After a certain period of using the inquiry list in various locations, the list was filled out and sent back to the scholarly team. The scholarly analysis of the collected data led to the first version of the inventory, which was followed by a second national meeting at the Ministry of Culture, where this version was commented on (Anastasova 2003). At this meeting, the existence of this "temporary" first version of the inventory on the Internet was announced, which offered a practical

¹⁰ Translated into Bulgarian and published in the journal *Balgarski folklor* 30 (2004) 3: 118–133 (see Santova 2004).

opportunity for many people to take part in discussing it. Over the entire period when this first version was accessible on the Internet, the scholarly team received daily opinions and recommendations from the entire country, which all spoke of the great activity and broad interest. This orientation period was followed by field research probes to verify some of the data received. Based on the findings and the recommendation already received from the state, a final version of the inventory was prepared and officially delivered to the state.

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BOLGARSKI KULTURNI CENTRI – ČITALNICE

Eden značilnejših pojavov v Bolgariji so kulturni centri, poznani kot čitališta (čitalnice), ustanove, ki so najtesneje povezane z lokalno skupnostjo, v kateri delujejo in se razvijajo. Kot kulturna in izobraževalna ustanova so v veliki meri oblikovale duhovno in družbeno življenje skupnosti. Hkrati so bile kot pojav s specifično strukturo in prisotnostjo v življenju skupnosti tudi velikokrat v središču političnih, vladnih in raziskovalnih interesov.

Prve čitalnice so nastale sredi 19. stoletja, ko so bile ustanovljene Elenka in Kiril D. Avramovi (v Svištovu 1852), Napredak (v Eleni 1863), Zora (v Ruse 1864), Napredak (v Šumenu 1869), Nadejda (v Velikem Tarnovu 1869) idr. Snovatelji, ustanovitelji čitalnic so bili v glavnem iz dveh družbenih skupin, učiteljev in trgovcev.

Pojav čitalnic kot civilnega združenja v številnih bolgarskih mestih v 60. in 70. letih 19. stoletja kaže na novo družbeno in kulturno ozračje v otomanskem cesarstvu. V času, ko so

bili Bolgari brez lastne države s političnimi in kulturnimi ustanovami, so bile čitalnice edina oblika, ki je zagotavljala razvoj in izražanje bolgarske skupnosti, bila soudežena pri družbenih in kulturnih procesih, pomembnih za bolgarsko narodno prebujenje v 19. stoletju. V prvem obdobju so imele predvsem vzgojno vlogo in so omogočale opismenjevanje. Ponujale so učbenike, časopise, predavanja in podpirale izobraževanje mladih Bolgarov zunaj otomanskega cesarstva. Po pridobljeni neodvisnosti 1878 so čitalnice ohranile svojo vlogo kulturnega in družbenega središča lokalne skupnosti in hkrati nadaljevale s poslanstvom, da ohranjajo in razvijajo tradicionalne vrednote in kulturo lokalne skupnosti in jih posredujejo mlajšim rodovom; postale so mesto srečavanja starejših in mlajših.

Število je stalno naraščalo, čitalnice so same oblikovale interna pravila delovanja in upravljanja; šele leta 1927 je bil izglasovan zakon o čitalnicah, ki je urejal državnopravni status, a so lokalne skupnosti še naprej avtonomno vodile čitalnice. Njihov položaj se je spremenil s centralizacijo in podreditvijo državi s strani nove komunistične oblasti v obdobju 1944–1989. Nova oblast je hkrati zboljšala materialno stanje čitalnic, obogatila knjižni fond in pospešila komunikacijo med čitalnicami in drugimi ustanovami. Po letu 1989 so državno podporo zmanjšali in ukinili, hkrati so postale čitalnice nevladne in nepridobitne organizacije, ki se morajo za denarno podporo tako kakor druge organizacije in društva potegovati na različnih domačih in mednarodnih razpisih.

Čitalnice so v zadnjih letih znova odkrile svojo vlogo tradicionalnega kulturnega in izobraževalnega središča lokalne skupnosti. Zagotavljajo dostop do novih vsebin, do svetovnega spleta, organizirajo kulturno življenje v mestih in vaseh in so postale posrednice med lokalnimi skupnostmi in globalizirano družbo. Hkrati so vir informacij o pomembnih procesih v državi in Evropski skupnosti. Kot dinamično središče družbenih in kulturnih aktivnosti lokalne skupnosti skupnost so pomembne tudi za ohranjanje in spodbujanje lokalnih tradicionalnih kulturnih izročil. Živim nosilcem tradicionalnih znanj omogočajo posredovanje informacij mlajši generaciji. Tako so postala središča pomemben partner pri oblikovanju podatkovnih zbirk tradicionalnih praks, pri čemer številni akterji tesno sodelujejo z raziskovalci. Tako se na eni strani oblikujejo pravila in smernice za zbiranje podatkov, za same prakse, hkrati pa nastaja register oziroma inventar dediščine, ki je bil tudi uradno izročen državnim ustanovam.

Prof. Mila Santova, D. Sci., Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with National Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Acad. G. Bonchev St., bl. 6, Sofia 1113, Bulgaria

Assist. Prof. Stella Nenova, St. Cyril and Methodius' University of Veliko Tarnovo, T. Tarnovski 2 Str., 5003 Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, steld2@yahoo.com