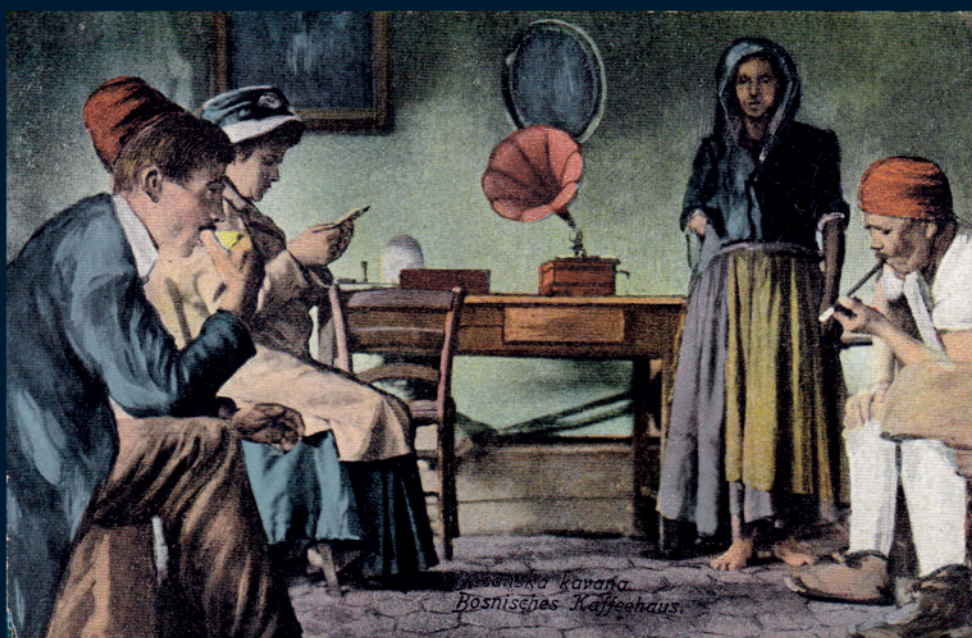


OTTOMAN INTIMACIES, BALKAN MUSICAL REALITIES



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BALKAN MUSICAL REALITIES

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BALKAN MUSICAL REALITIES

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Negotiating the “Oriental”: Roma and the Political Economy of Representation in Bulgarian Popfolk

Carol Silverman

Popfolk or *chalga*, a fusion of folk music with pop music, wedding music and Romani music, has become a huge phenomenon in Bulgaria with thousands of fans. Similar fusions exist throughout the Balkans, yet each version has an ideological role specific to its nation/state. This paper analyzes Bulgarian *chalga* economically, politically and representationally, with an eye to the role of Roma and the debates about “orientalism, Easternness and Balkan-ness”.¹ Critics of *chalga*, composed of the intelligentsia, nationalists and many folk musicians, accuse it of being crass, low class, pornographic, banal, kitch and of using bad and/or formulaic music and too many Eastern elements. Defenders see *chalga* as a bridge between East and West or as pan-Balkan entertainment and emphasize musical unity with Balkan neighbours.

Among scholars, *chalga*’s Ottoman legacy in the form of inclusiveness, “symbiosis” or “cosmopolitanism” has been discussed as a strength and possibly as a counteraction to ethnic nationalism.² The situation on the ground is more complicated. As Bulgarian DJ and New York City resident Joro Boro wrote: “*Chalga* defines Bulgaria as a country ambivalently placed at Europe’s cultural border with the Middle East, incorporating both Soviet and Ottoman rule in its past. Viewed from there, Bulgarian culture, like the culture of its neighbours, has a history of cultural hybrids and *chalga* takes its rightful place in that history.”³

Why my emphasis on Roma? For some opponents, *chalga* has become the enemy of the nation, and Roma are to blame. True, *chalga* uses many Romani musical styles and visual elements, and Roma are sometimes employed in the industry. However, at the same time that their music has been appropriated, Roma have faced exclusions from and challenges within mainstream forms of *chalga*, where the real money and power are located, and *chalga* itself has been recruited for nationalistic projects, often anti-Romani. Moreover, Roma are often caught in a representational dilemma where the only depictions available to them are stereotypical images and music/dance styles that define them (and by extension all Balkan people) in the public’s eyes as “backward”. Furthermore, Roma are rarely in charge of creating their own representations. Unlike in Romania, where Roma control the production of popfolk or *manele*, in Bulgaria, no Roma own or manage popfolk companies. This article analyzes these contradictions and also analyzes how two Romani *chalga* stars have strategically manoeuvred in this charged terrain.

Chalga styles can be grouped into several categories. The Europop style uses standard 2/4 pop rhythms and rhyming verses, has no Eastern ethnic markers and may be seen as division of Europop. A second style uses Bulgarian folk music styles, such as the

¹ Portions of this paper are taken from Silverman 2012 with permission of Oxford University Press.

² Rice 2002; Buchanan 2007; Dimov 2001.

³ DJ Joro Boro, email 20 June 2011, quoting from his unpublished essay “Chalga and Bulgaria’s Place in Culture” that was part of the 2009 exhibit “The Temptation of Chalga” at the Sofia City Art Gallery; see Balkan Travellers 2009 and Trankova 2009.

7/8 rhythm characteristic of the Pirin/Macedonia region, evoking nostalgia for rural life. The Gypsy style is the most widespread, marked by the *kyuchek* rhythm (in varieties of 2/4 and 4/4) and solo instrumental improvisations. *Kyuchek* is shared by Turks and Roma and symbolically codes the genre as “Eastern” or “Oriental”. For Bulgarians, *kyuchek* as a dance is known as a female Romani solo “belly-dance” genre involving sensuous movements of the hips, shoulders, torso and hands.

The Eastern-ness in *chalga* is often depicted as an “Oriental” fantasy of sensuality, neither a real place nor a real ethnicity. As Kurkela pointed out, in *chalga* there are few specific references to Turkey or the Middle East in text or place,⁴ rather there are symbolic allusions in terms of rhythm, melody, texture and imagery. In Bulgaria, Roma are coded as free, sexual and musical: all three themes contribute to the “production of the oriental” via symbolic Eastern instrumental styles plus Eastern references in texts, such as sheiks and harems.⁵ Certain scales are used, for example Phrygian (often *makam Kürdî*) and *makam Hicâz*, although these are not exclusively employed, and synthesized flutes and *zurnas* (double-reed pipes played exclusively by Roma) and *arabesk*-like instrumental fillers signal “Eastern-ness”. In videos a full range of Eastern images are added – women belly-dance wearing skimpy *shalvari* (billowing Muslim pants) with much exposed skin, sometimes in scenarios featuring palm readers, sultans, harems, gongs and horses. In addition to *kyuchek* as a rhythm and dance, an important Gypsy musical hallmark in *chalga* is the *taksim* or *mane*, the improvised free-rhythm solo; however, its presence has diminished in recent years. This highlights the increasing invisibility of Romani instrumentalists at the same time that generic Gypsy musical style remains ubiquitous. Whereas in early (pre 2000) *chalga*, one could see live Romani musicians in videos playing live improvisations, this is rare in more recent *chalga*.

Post-2000 Trends in *Chalga*

Drawing from Western models, *chalga* videos have always featured the partially unclothed female body as an object of male desire. As a Bulgarian musician in Chicago said to me, “The *chalga* crowd listens with their eyes”. This trend can be linked to the sexualization of the female body, the rise in pornography and the rise in prostitution during post-socialism. After over forty years of images of women as socialist, neutered peasant workers, today many Bulgarians have embraced femininity in its most commercial form: beauty products, cosmetic surgery and *chalga* videos.⁶

Chalga always had an erotic thread, but by the mid-2000s the female star had eclipsed the musicians and all other elements; now the female voice and the star’s image reigns. Stars are known by their first names, wear designer wardrobes, have bodyguards, pose for pin-ups and men’s magazines and endorse products such as beer and telephones. Like movie stars, they have fan clubs and websites with interactive chat rooms.⁷ The typical female *chalga* star is a non-Romani bombshell with fair skin and often blonde hair. On the other hand, some Bulgarians accuse all *chalga* singers and musicians of being Gypsy – this relates to the representational contradictions in *chalga*, its Eastern elements

⁴ Kurkela 2007, 156.

⁵ Kurkela 1997; *id.* 2007; Dimov 2001; Buchanan 2007.

⁶ Ranova 2006; Daskalova 2000, 348–350.

⁷ See www.bg-fen.com for *chalga* gossip, news, music reviews and interactive discussions.

and its low status, as I will explore later.

The media hype about *chalga* stars is carefully orchestrated by production companies. Since its debut in 2001, the Payner Company helped shape and now dominates the industry, causing Romani clarinetist Ivo Papazov to comment in 2005: "Payner is stronger than the government. They run the popfolk empire." Payner records artists, produces and distributes CDs and DVDs, orchestrates promotions, sponsors tours, festivals and contests, publishes calendars, pinups and fan magazines, and runs a radio station, two cable television stations,⁸ a cosmetic surgery business, a party-planning service, an amusement park and hotel and many music stores and *chalga* clubs.⁹ Payner regularly sponsors its contracted artists on tours to other Balkan countries and to the West, especially to cities where there are large Bulgarian émigré populations.

I argue that since the early 2000s we can observe the development of "mainstream *chalga*", characterized by the female sex star and the orchestration of large media promotions and as a by product, a diminished role of Romani musicians. Payner's events have the formula of high production values and a bevy of female stars in skimpy outfits. In addition to the mainstream, other branches of *chalga* exist, including Romani, Turkish and wedding music, but they receive less mainstream media attention.



Fig. 1. Emilia.

Trends in mainstream *chalga* in the last decade include more sophisticated production techniques (e.g. computer simulations, animation and complicated stagings), more narrative stagings, better dancing and a more pronounced Europop aesthetic, specifically collaboration with DJs and the use of hip hop dance and clothing styles. Political texts, common in early *chalga*, have dropped out of mainstream *chalga* almost entirely, emphasizing its entertainment function. For example, in the 1990s, texts critiquing political parties and corruption were common, but now they are rare. Recently, more sexualized

⁸ See Planeta.

⁹ See Payner.

male singers have entered the scene, but women still predominate. Another trend is collaboration with popfolk singers from other Balkan countries, especially Romania.

The Romani *Kyuchek* elements are still visible and audible in mainstream *chalga* but they have become more stylized and abstract, and have been absorbed into formulaic narratives of the “Orient” enacted by larger casts of dancers and actors. For example, Emilia’s 2005 song *Zabravi* (“Forget!” [Bulgarian]) features a text about failed love and a visual display that includes a bare-chested man striking a gong (engraved with E for Emilia, but reminiscent of the sign for the Euro).¹⁰ In addition, a harem-like group of women in sheer veils dance synchronous steps that are closer to Hollywood or Bollywood than belly-dance. The dancers are then transformed into hip hop performers with a DJ, and the video concludes with the gong. Another example of the stylized Orient is the song *Vlez* (“Enter” [Bulgarian]), a collaboration between the new star Tsvetelina Yaneva and Romanian singer Ionut Cercel (Costi).¹¹ Analyzed in Vesa Kurkela’s paper in this collection, *Vlez* combines the pseudo-realism of a Middle Eastern marketplace with Eastern sensuality and exoticism.

Bulgarian audiences have recently shown signs of fatigue with mainstream *chalga* and now cable channels have broadened their offerings. Payner’s cable channel Planeta Folk that debuted in 2008 shows how *chalga* and wedding music (a hybrid of folk and Western styles) are moving closer to each other.¹² Payner now features some of its *chalga* stars singing wedding songs with wedding bands in village stagings with folk dance ensembles. This illustrates the assimilation of the allure of *chalga* into a more wholesome folk image of wedding music; moreover, it is tied to an emerging ideological strain of nationalism (see below). It also reveals a conscious marketing strategy; Payner is not only legitimating *chalga* by allying it with wedding music, but it is also putting glitz into folk music by having *chalga* stars sing it.

Kyuchek rhythms are still very common in mainstream *chalga* but no longer are musicians depicted; there are fewer and shorter solo *taksims* and the synthesizer has taken over. In 2001 Payner’s Planeta compilation hit mix CD included Turkish and Romani songs, but by 2004, Payner’s hit mix had only Bulgarian language songs sung by predominantly female stars. Romani and Turkish music is certainly released by Payner and other companies (such as songs by Amet, Yuliya Bikova, Kondyo, Ork. Kristali, Nazmi’ler and Ana-Maria) but on separate CDs and videos, often labelled “Oriental rhythms”. Mainstream *chalga* has become less ethnic precisely at a time when nationalism is on the rise. However, there are several Romani singers that fall in the more mainstream category such as Boni, Toni Storaro, Sofi Marinova and Azis. Below I discuss representational choices of Marinova and Azis.

Another popfolk forum where Roma seem to be invisible is the Balkan Music Awards, which debuted in May 2010 in Sofia. These annual awards are sponsored by the Balkanika music television channel, part of the media conglomerate Fen TV, owned by the Kazımov brothers, who also manage the labels Ara-Diapason and the cable channels

¹⁰ See Emilia 2005. The song appeared on the album *Hitove na Planeta Payner 3* (2005). Emilia is one of the top stars promoted by Payner. She has been featured on the cover of the Bulgarian edition of FHM (For Him Magazine) and in several revealing photograph spreads in the fan magazine *Nov Folk*. See Fig 1.

¹¹ See Yaneva and Cercel 2010.

¹² Silverman 2007.

Fen (Fan)¹³ and Folklor¹⁴. According to its website,¹⁵ Balkanika has presented the "united music of Balkans [*sic*]" since 2005 from eleven countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro and Turkey. Balkanika claims that: "The channel acts as a virtual bridge between fans of the Balkan rhythms from different ethnic, religious and cultural background" [*sic*]. Note that its genres are labelled "pop, rock, ethno and retro music." Although Romani styles and *kyuchek* rhythms are common on this channel, the word Gypsy is not mentioned; perhaps it is too stigmatized. Also note that Kosovo is not included; its status is too controversial.

Furthermore, at the Balkan Music Awards in 2010 and 2011, Europop styles with virtually no Eastern ethnic elements predominated in every entry from every country despite the dominant discourse about pan-Balkan strengths. In an insightful conference paper, ethnomusicologist Ana Hofman interprets the lack of Balkan styles at the awards as a deliberate distancing from the stereotypic image of the Balkans because it is tainted by Gypsies.¹⁶ She employs Bakić-Hayden's 1995 concept of "nesting orientalisms" to decipher this shifting denomination (see below), whereby the Balkans are "Oriental" to Europe but Roma are "Oriental" within the Balkans. The underlying question, however, in the awards and in the subtext of many cultural debates is: are the Balkans part of Europe? Deriving legitimacy as "the Balkan Eurovision", and calling its judges "the Balkan Academy", the Balkan Music Awards emphasize Balkan commonalities and shared European values. However, in the awards pan-Balkan Gypsy styles were erased in favour of showcasing European popular musical culture.¹⁷

Chalga, "Balkanism" and Ethnic Politics

We may now return to an analysis of the culture wars over *chalga*, which have polarized Bulgarian society. Not surprisingly, debates about popfolk in various countries have centred on what it means to be Balkan, often contrasted to what it means to be European.¹⁸ The historian Maria Todorova, for example, has written eloquently on the ambivalent attitude of Bulgarians toward the Ottoman past, and Kiossev reminds us that for Bulgarians, Balkan can be coded as either positive or negative. It can mean uncivilized, Oriental and backward or familiar and intimate or "tricksterlike".¹⁹

¹³ See Fen.

¹⁴ See Folklor.

¹⁵ See Balkanika.

¹⁶ Hofman 2011. Note that despite the lack of Balkan styles in the competition, Goran Bregović and Esma Redžepova performed as guests in a gala concert in June 2011. These two artists, the former non-Romani and the latter Romani, are both strongly associated with Gypsy music and drew a large audience. Thus, Gypsy music seems to be acceptable for entertainment for generating crowds, but not in the official competition.

¹⁷ Eran Livni notes that the awards as well as other parts of the Fen TV media company are run according to a strict business model where profits are paramount (pers. comm.).

¹⁸ Ditcher writes "the new identity debates in the 1990s was largely dominated by the question of whether or not to be Balkan" (2002, 235). The issue of European Union membership has heightened these issues.

¹⁹ Todorova 1997. Kiossev writes of the "dark intimacy" of acts of identification, as in "we're all just Balkan shit" (2002, 182, 183 and 189). Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy can be fruitfully applied here (1997). Kiossev writes: "Balkan culture domesticates the official codes of national representation [...] through the multiple uses, misuses, and flexible appropriations performed by social actors in everyday life. Popular amusements in the Balkans produce ironic self-images and display them in semi-public spaces of insiders' 'collective pri-

Note that the figure of the Gypsy looms rather prominently in the imagery of the backward/Oriental Balkans or in Kiossev's terms "the stigma".²⁰ In all Balkan languages (in fact in most European languages), Gypsy is used as a slur, meaning thief, and in Bulgarian *tsiganska rabota* (Gypsy work) means a job poorly done or a deceitful business move. Again, the concept of "nesting orientalisms"²¹ can be helpful in teasing out who is perceived as more Balkan or more "other" than whom. Bulgarians may be Balkan/Oriental to Western Europeans (or even Croatians) but Gypsies are Balkan/Oriental to Bulgarians. Sugarman reminds us that not only are Roma the most marginalized group, but they are precisely the group from which pop/folk appropriated its style: "Within this dynamic of musical 'nesting Orientalisms,' Roma are of course in a class by themselves, both as the group which all others have stigmatized and as the musicians who once dominated the spheres in which the majority of the new regional genres arose".²²

Eran Livni claims that "the exclusion of Romani music from the national music canon reflects the low social status to which Roma people are confined: the most derogated 'Balkanist Other.' A common perception in Bulgaria is that maintaining the public space 'European' and 'civilized' means cleansing it from 'backward Gypsies'" ²³ Critiquing a narrow application of "Orientalism" to the Balkans, Todorova introduced the concept of "Balkanism" to show how the Balkans are constructed as a locus of "backwardness" for the West.²⁴ Looking at multiple layers of "othering" and lack of "civility", film scholar Dina Iordanova expanded Todorova's concept to underline the special position of Roma in "Balkanist" discourse. She explains that Roma in the Balkans serve as a metaphor for the entire Balkans to Europe: "when choosing Roma stories and characters, Balkan film-makers use them as a metaphor in 'Balkan to Europe as Gypsies to us' sense. The fact that the Roma are considered to be the least integrated ethnic community in these parts bears direct parallels to the way the Balkans are seen in a wider context – as the least integrated group of countries within the greater European realm."²⁵

In the debates about *chalga* in Bulgaria, it is, then, not surprising that the criticism about Eastern elements is often phrased specifically against Roma; for example, I frequently heard the following phrase: "It is a shame that now Bulgarians only want to hear Gypsy music". Levy cites slogans from newspapers such as "Down with *kyuchek*" and "It wouldn't be surprising if soon the national anthem sounded oriental", and she describes a 1999 petition to parliament signed by prominent cultural figures which pleaded for a "cleansing" of the national soundscape, where the petitioners referred to *chalga* as "bad", "vulgar", and "strange" sounds coming from the "uncivilized experiences of the local Gypsies and Turks". The petition expressed concern "about an invasion by their music which might result in the 'gypsification' and 'turkification' of the nation".²⁶ Note that *chalga*, and thus Roma, are associated with low morals and lack of civilization. Levy points out that nationalists see heritage as threatened and they personify the threat in

vacy' [...]. It also often scandalously perverts these negative auto-stereotypes into positive ones, with a peculiar emotional ambivalence [...]" (2002, 189–190).

²⁰ Kiossev 2002, 189.

²¹ Bakić-Hayden 1995.

²² Sugarman 2007, 303.

²³ Livni 2011, 273–274.

²⁴ Todorova 1997.

²⁵ Iordanova 2001, 215–216.

²⁶ Levy 2002, 224.

Roma.

Ironically, despite the branding of the entire genre of *chalga* as Gypsy, therefore negative, one recent strain in *chalga* emphasizes Bulgarian nationalism which is inherently anti-Roma. Around 2005, patriotic texts and imagery began to appear and some *chalga* singers started to display their religiosity by wearing large Eastern Orthodox crosses (crosses are also a symbol of wealth) and indentifying with nationalistic issues. Precisely during this period the xenophobic Attack (*Ataka*) party made its noticeable debut. In 2005 it achieved a stunning victory when it captured 8% of parliamentary votes. Its anti-Romani platform (i.e. Roma are dangerous) and its anti-Turkish, anti-Muslim platform (i.e. Turks are fanatics) embraces cultural issues such as supporting the Eastern Orthodox Church and protesting the construction of mosques.²⁷

More recently, Attack supporters have declined in numbers but more mainstream parties, including the ruling centrist party, have adopted some of its tenets; furthermore, Attack is legitimated by having representatives in the European Parliament. I don't think it is an accident that nationalistic imagery and texts arose in *chalga* along with the rise of nationalistic parties. For example, in the finale from a 2005 Payner megaconcert, after views of Bachkovo Monastery (signifying religious heritage), *chalga* stars on stage were filmed holding hands performing a song about the Virgin Mary with the refrain "Thank God we have such a clean and good land". This text is not so much about religion but about patriotism. In this concert, children were brought on stage, emphasizing the "family values" of *chalga*. Other *chalga* songs with patriotic texts from this period refer to the Iraq war and to Bulgarian soldiers' sacrifices throughout history.

Thus, *chalga* embeds contradictory messages regarding state loyalty, market relations and ethnic diversity. One message demonizes the genre as backward/Gypsy; another blames Roma for the commercialism of Balkan music; another lauds *chalga* as the modern successor to Ottoman cosmopolitanism; another emphasizes the Europop elements and proclaims European modernity; another appropriates Romani styles but rejects Roma and embraces nationalism. Moreover, Roma are either branded as Oriental stereotypes or hybrid innovators or else rejected as polluters of national purity.

Imre uses the phrase "double cooptation" to refer to the untenable position Roma artists occupy as they are caught between the state and the market.²⁸ "The Roma are twice rendered object in the negotiation between nation-states and corporate agents of globalization and Europeanization. First because they are perceived as unable and unwilling to assimilate to the national project [...]. Second, the Roma are also demonized because of their inherently transnational identity affiliations which turns them into convenient suspects for allying themselves with the dreaded forces of globalization."²⁹

Ditchev points out that *chalga*, as "low class music", is totally excluded from the rubric "culture"; this rubric is reserved for the high arts and folklore that "instill love for the homeland". Bulgaria is not conceived of as a place where different ethnicities live together but rather a "form of kinship, based upon pure and direct (imagined, of course) filiation". Roma are, of course, left out of this equation of place with monoethnicity. Furthermore, culture is opposed to pleasure and consumption.³⁰ Thus, Roma are twice erased: first in terms of being outside the nation and second in terms of being too tied to

²⁷ Ghodsee 2008.

²⁸ Imre 2008, 335.

²⁹ Imre 2006, 661.

³⁰ Ditchev 2004.

consumption.

Ideological statements about music need to be placed in a larger political framework, specifically the rise in nationalism. A 2005 Gallup poll conducted by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee shows that one-fifth of Bulgarians are so anti-Romani (and also anti-Turk and, to a slightly lesser extent, anti-Semitic) that they do not recognize the right of these minorities to live in the same country as “pure Bulgarians”; 27% of Bulgarians would not want to live in the same country as Roma. In answering the question “would you personally accept a Roma as a local police chief?” 82% said “no”; similar figures were obtained when the question asked about a government minister or an army officer. 85–86% of respondents agreed with the statement that Roma are lazy, irresponsible and untrustworthy (57% agreed with the statement that “Turks are religious fanatics”; and 29% agreed that “Jews are taking up many leadership positions”, in spite of their total absence from state leadership). The poll found that these attitudes are clustered neither by age, nor region, nor educational level, nor income level but rather spread out among all Bulgarians, indicating “deeply rooted prejudices, carried over [...] from the entire child-rearing and educational system”.³¹

It is not surprising, then, that the racist themes of parties like Attack are attractive to some Bulgarians. As mentioned above, in the June 2005 parliamentary elections Attack received 8.14% of the vote and became the fourth largest party in parliament. In October 2006 Volen Siderov, head of Attack, received 21% of the votes for president. Attack is against the European Union membership of Turkey, and one of Attack’s campaign mottos is precisely the phrase used in the petition discussed above: “No to Gypsification! No to Turkification!” On its cable channel SKAT, Attack broadcast seven programmes on criminality and “Gypsy Terror” in which Siderov suggested that Bulgarians “were being murdered, robbed, beaten and raped daily by an alien minority and were not getting any protection from the law enforcement authorities who had united with the Roma against the Bulgarians because they are the employees of a corrupt ruling class.”³²

Attack and other nationalist parties claim that there is reverse discrimination and that Bulgarians are now the victims and Roma are the perpetrators. They have managed to take the Roma, the most vulnerable citizens of Bulgaria, and construct them as a criminal race that “sows terror against Bulgarians unhindered by the state”. In fact, in one Attack TV broadcast, Roma were called cockroaches.³³ Attack supporters have used the slogan “Gypsies into soap”, and a rap song with this phrase circulated on private channels. Attack has found many allies in the European Parliament and is part of a group called “Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty”, whose platform is anti-immigration, anti-European Union constitution and anti-Turkish membership. The leader of the group was fined by the French Court for remarks made in 2004 questioning the Holocaust.

Thus, returning to the topic of music, we can see that as Romani music has been appropriated into *chalga*, Roma themselves have not become more integrated socially, economically or politically into Bulgarian society. Rather, Roma remain marginal, and, in fact, Romani activists claim that the human rights of Roma have deteriorated since Bulgaria became a member of the European Union in 2007. Ironically, Bulgaria is no longer subject to the strict EU monitoring of human rights that accession required. The ruling party is moving toward the right; for example, in 2010 it did not raise objections to the

³¹ Cohen 2005; also see Ghodsee 2008.

³² Kanev 2005.

³³ Kanev 2005.

deportations of Roma from France back to Bulgaria, and in 2011 it audited many Romani organizations in a long and harassing process.

True, Romani musicians found work as *chalga* musicians in the 1990s, but in the last two decades the Romani presence in *chalga* has become a topic of national debate. Thus, I now briefly turn to two of the handful of Romani stars who have managed to be successful in mainstream *chalga*, Sofi Marinova and Azis.

Sofi Marinova

Sofi Marinova is one of the most talented *chalga* vocalists but, being Romani, she does not fall into the category of the typical bombshell, and thus her career has not been standard. She was born in 1975 in Sofia, speaks Romani, is self taught, and from a young age she performed in bars and at Romani weddings.³⁴ Called the *Romska perla* ("Gypsy Pearl" [Bulgarian]), she recorded for several years with the Romani band Super Ekspres and in 1996 they won the grand prize at the Stara Zagora Romani festival. Sofi's masterful technique can be heard in her Romani songs where she executes exquisite descending runs and repeated mordents.



Fig. 2. Sofi Marinova.

In the past, Sofi had many fans, but she was slow to achieve visibility in mainstream *chalga*, probably due to her ethnicity. In 2005, however, Sofi became part of a huge public scandal involving television host Slavi Trifonov and the Eurovision Song

³⁴ Cartwright 2005b.

Contest. She was the butt of cruel comments and racist remarks, and the polarization of Bulgarian society around *chalga* surfaced. A virulent anti-Romani campaign focused on whether a Romani artist could properly represent Bulgaria in a European-wide contest. Note that Sofi and Slavi's song *Edinstveni* ("Unique Ones" [Bulgarian]) that was derailed from Eurovision in 2005, had extremely subtle Romani elements.³⁵ Its rhythm is the type of *kyuchek* typically used to invoke India, accented by *darbuka* and *daire*, two typically "Eastern" instruments. But there are also strong pop elements in the song.

As a result of the Eurovision scandal, Sofi's career mushroomed; she began to perform in the West (e.g. Brussels, London), and her image was transformed. On her earlier albums she was depicted as a Middle Eastern playgirl, whereas after 2004, she became more elegant (see Fig. 2). Her 2004 album was titled *5 Oktava lyubov* ("Five Octaves of Love" [Bulgarian]) referring to her five-octave range. On this album Sofi shows her mastery of multiple Balkan vocal styles as well as languages: two songs are in Serbian, two in Greek and two in Turkish, in addition to several songs in her native Bulgarian and Romani languages. For example, she sings *Ušest* (Serbian line dance) with regional ornamentation in a Serbian dialect of Romani. She also sings a duet with Serbian Romani singer Zvonko Demirović. Finally, she uses talented guest musicians on this album rather than using the bland synthesized arrangements typical of most *chalga* singers.

Sofi partakes in all the trappings of mainstream *chalga* stardom described earlier, but she also openly identifies as a Romani singer. However, being a practical artist, she does not avoid formulaic sexuality in her more mainstream videos. This is a delicate balance. In *Stiga nomera* ("Enough of That Trick" [Bulgarian]), for example, she dances *kyuchek* to a reworked Romani tune in a contemporary setting.³⁶ We may say that she participates in her own stereotypification, but for Sofi there are two levels: first as a mainstream *chalga* sex symbol and second as an exotic Romani female vocalist. Remember that not only do stereotypes sell, but also that music videos are manufactured by private production companies, none of which are owned or operated by Roma; thus Roma usually are not making independent decisions about their representations. Sofi, however, has achieved a level of success that allows her some power to shape her songs and image.

On Marinova's 2006 album, she sings *Vyatür* ("Wind" [Bulgarian]), a remake in the Romani language of pop diva Lili Ivanova's hit song, with brass band instrumentation. Indeed, Sofi used to be called the Romani Lili Ivanova. She also described her affinity for films from India, the Romani homeland, and she claimed the timbre of her voice "resembles a bit an Indian voice" when she sings in Romani.³⁷ Indeed, in her song *V Drug svyat zhiveya* ("I Live in Another World" [Bulgarian]) she uses a high-pitched Indian voice timbre and sings one verse in Hindi. The song also features a variant of a *kyuchek* rhythm associated with India, synthesized Rajasthani drums (*dhol*) and string and flute fillers reminiscent of Indian film music.

The fact that Sofi clearly identifies as a Romani popfolk singer was narrated by an astute fan, Nick Nasev: "Sofi performed at a concert in Gotse Delchev to a sold-out crowd of non-Romani elite businessmen and middle-class Roma; poor Roma who couldn't afford the tickets gathered outside and climbed on an adjacent building to see and hear her; they knew every word of her songs. When Sofi realized this, she went outside to sing directly to them. She said to them (in Romani): "This is where I was as a little girl." The

³⁵ See Sofi and Slavi 2007. The Eurovision scandal is discussed in Silverman 2012.

³⁶ See Sofi 2006.

³⁷ Lozanova 2006, 18.

management was annoyed but they knew the huge Romani crowd was a tribute to her, so they gave out free Cokes to the Roma" (pers. comm.).

In the last seven years, Sofi has re-emphasized her personal brand of popfolk with many songs in Romani. In 2005 she released *Vasilica* ("St. Basil's Day") that describes the Romani customs of this winter holiday. Also in 2005 she released *Ah lele* ("Oh Dear") which is a Bulgarian language remake of an Albanian Romani song by Muharem Ahmeti, a Romani singer from Tetovo, Macedonia. On her 2008 album she sang the "Romani anthem" *Dželem dželem* ("I Travelled" [Romani]), *Mik mik* ("Wink, Wink"; a remake of a popular older song) and *Bubamara*, taken from the Serbian Romani singer Šaban Bajramović. In 2009 she and rap star Ustata released *Bate shefe* ("Uncle Boss") which is a playful parody of both rap and Romani songs, in English, Bulgarian and Romani languages.³⁸

Marinova's ties to Romani music were further cemented with her 2007 collaboration with Azis (see below) but five years later she entered the national Bulgarian Eurovision contest in 2012 with a song that had neither Romani nor Balkan elements. Rather than viewing this as contradictory, I observe Marinova making strategic representational choices. With *Love Unlimited*,³⁹ a song in pop style where Marinova sings "I love you" in multiple languages, she won the right to represent Bulgaria despite being Romani. She was denied this in 2005 when her duet with Trifonov was mired in a musical/ethnic scandal about Gypsies. Has Bulgaria become more tolerant of Roma since 2005? I think not; rather Sofi's strategy changed. In 2012 she won by playing it safe and being more mainstream; by erasing telltale Romani markers and emphasizing her European and Bulgarian identities, as well as her vocal abilities, she won a place in Eurovision. On the other hand, playing it safe has not been the strategy for Azis.

Azis

Azis is a notable exception to my earlier observation about the predominance of female *chalga* singers. Indeed, Azis, who emerged as a mega-star in the last decade, is an exception to many of the rules of *chalga*. A Romani male who is ambiguous sexually, transgendered and transvestite, he breaks every Balkan gender code of behaviour. In his videos, he dances erotic *kyucheks*, loves fancy gowns, make-up, feathers, sequins and high heeled boots, has sex with men, women, himself or several people at once or watches others engage in sexual acts. He can be super macho or super feminine or both simultaneously. The public fascination with him draws on his transgressive behaviour which is tolerable and even expected because he is Romani; if he were a Bulgarian man he would be despised (see Fig. 3).

Azis is by far the most radical Romani performer in Bulgaria today. In 2005 he was a candidate for a parliamentary position in the Evroroma political party but did not win. Bulgarians either love him or hate him, and consequently he has amplified the debates about the crassness of *chalga*. In 2006, Sunny Records published his autobiography (with pin-up photographs); it is basically a guide to his sex life, including cosmetic surgeries.⁴⁰

³⁸ See Sofi and Ustata 2009.

³⁹ See Sofi 2012.

⁴⁰ Azis 2006.

Music journalist Garth Cartwright wrote that “You don’t count Azis’s press cuttings, you weigh them [...]. His metamorphosis into the most controversial entertainer in Bulgarian history involved a demonic appearance-shift and videos so lurid, so hallucinated with desire, they leave efforts by The Prodigy and Marilyn Manson gathering MTV dust”.⁴¹

A Kalderash Rom, Azis was born Vasil Boyanov in 1978 in Sliven and at a young age started singing Christian Romani songs with his Pentecostal family. He performed in a bar where he worked as a waiter and sang at weddings, eventually winning the best singer award at the 1999 Stara Zagora Romani music festival. Azis realized from a young age that he was an outsider in multiple ways (in terms of ethnicity, gender and sexuality) and that he could either suffer from this situation or capitalize on it. His autobiography begins by describing the 1996 Bulgarian National Television contest (for pop music) for young talent, which he says he deserved to win. He wore blue contact lenses and a great deal of hair gel: “They stopped me in the middle [of my song]. They told me thank you. By their tone I realized that I lost. And I knew why. Because I am a Gypsy. I was ashamed of this. That’s how they lost a male pop singer. But Azis was born. Even Gypsies hate me [...]. Because I am fair and blue eyed.”⁴²

As a child Azis played with dolls and dressed in his mother’s clothes. As a teenager he cleaned offices, walked dogs for rich people and performed as a transvestite.⁴³ When he was interviewed on Slavi’s TV show in 2005 he admitted that as a young man he could not make a living as a wedding singer, so he and his agent invented the persona Azis. On the show he refused to define his sexuality – part of his mystique comes from audiences guessing. In October 2006 he married a man at a huge wedding in a Sofia nightclub in front of an audience of *chalga* stars and 200 journalists. Still, he would not pigeonhole his sexuality. His wedding was the first public homosexual union in Bulgaria, a country with very traditional values. He and his partner now have a child. While he is not overtly political, Azis underscored that part of being in the European Union is being tolerant toward homosexuals.⁴⁴

Like Madonna and Lady Gaga, Azis capitalizes on shock value in his performances. He has broken numerous taboos, and the list is growing. Not only does he refuse to be categorized by sex (male, female), gender (masculine, feminine) or sexuality (homo-

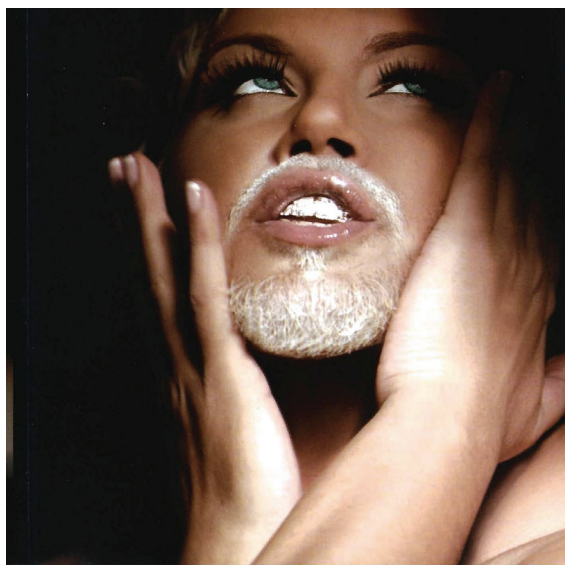


Fig. 3. Azis diva.

⁴¹ Cartwright 2005a, 262–263.

⁴² Azis 2006, 12–13.

⁴³ Cartwright 2005a, 260, 266.

⁴⁴ Nov Folk 2007, 4.

sexual, heterosexual, bisexual), but his clothing and image shift constantly. Musically, he is a versatile and talented vocalist and can sing slow Bulgarian folk songs with complicated ornamentation. On his 2004 album *Kralyat* ("The King" [Bulgarian]) he includes one of these traditional songs, juxtaposed with a poster-sized pin-up that exaggerates the contrast between his brown skin and bleached white hair. The album also includes a Bollywood song, plus its inside cover shows Azis masturbating, and in another shot he wears red thigh-high platform boots and a pink fur hat. Thus the traditional, the erotic, the exotic and the transgressive are all juxtaposed.

Azis took his name from Turkey, and, indeed, he can be fruitfully compared to two transgressive Turkish (non-Romani) singers: Zeki Müren and Bülent Ersoy. Müren had multiple gendered personas, sometimes wore female clothing and played with a Liberace-type flamboyant male style. Ersoy is a transsexual, that is, she declared himself a woman after surgery, but she keeps much about her personal life hidden. Both artists were influenced by the female singer Müzeyyen Senar.⁴⁵ Azis has similarly drawn one of his main personas from the hypersexuality of mainstream *chalga* singers; the trick is that he is a man exacting the hypersexualized female role. From a historical perspective, Azis evokes professional Ottoman dancers who staged elaborate pageants and assumed various sexualities. Indeed, the comic and the playful have an important place in Azis's style.

Azis has also found affinities in the Romani homeland, India. He told Cartwright that when he was a child: "A friend [...] gave me a cassette of Indian music and [...] I listened to it day and night [...]. Whenever they showed Bollywood movies [...] hundreds of Gypsies would be waiting and when the movie started we would all begin to cry."⁴⁶ Embracing India, the song *Antigeröi* ("Antihero" [Bulgarian]) is filmed in grainy black and white and depicts kaleidoscopes of Azis wearing animalistic claws and green, yellow and orange body paint while dancing in front of a Hindu temple that has erotic sculptures.⁴⁷ This is obviously not a typical mainstream *chalga* video.⁴⁸ The song is taken from the popular 1993 Bollywood movie, *Khalnayak* (released in Bulgaria as *Antigeröi*). Azis sings the original song (in mangled Hindi) and then we hear the original female film singer. The lyrics caused a scandal in India because the Hindi refrain, *Choli ke peeche kya hai*, asking a woman "what is behind your shirt", could be interpreted sexually instead of the more acceptable answer, "my heart". The music, in a *rag* similar to *makam* Hicâz, features synthesized Indian instruments.

Azis portrays the fluidity of categories not only through his sexual encounters, but also through his musical voicings and through the shifts in the audience's point of view in his videos. In the 2008 clip *Nakarai me* ("Force Me" [Bulgarian]) Azis introduced (by name) three buff men (sometimes wearing women's accessories, one noticeably dark-skinned) and one practically nude female, and suggestively offers variable sexual combinations of the assembled five actors. Finally, in *Teb obicham* ("I Love You", [Bulgarian]), also released in 2008, he appears in a dress, earrings, make-up, and presents shifting sexualities in a black and white pageant; he also sings a vocal *mane* on the syllable *ah*, reminiscent of Romani instrumental improvisations.

⁴⁵ Stokes 2003, 319. Stokes analyzes these two singers in relation to concepts of modernity and reminds us that they cannot assumed to be critical of existing categories (2003).

⁴⁶ Cartwright 2005a, 266.

⁴⁷ The temple pictured is Khajuraho, in North India and it is, indeed, known for its erotic Hindu sculptures. There are other temples pictured in this video as well as shots of Tibetans praying at a Buddhist sacred site.

⁴⁸ See Azis 2007.

Finally, I turn to the 2007 duet *Edin zhivot ne stiga* (“One Life Isn’t Enough” [Bulgarian]) because it pairs the two Romani *chalga* stars I have discussed above, Azis and Sofi Marinova.⁴⁹ The vocal style is typically Romani, with florid ornamentation and with emotional cries, glottals and gasps. In a dramatic moment Azis even switches to falsetto briefly at the end. The text is a love poem in Bulgarian but it switches to Romani for the last two lines.⁵⁰

Obich moya nenagledna, slüntse i luna	My darling love, sun and moon
Radost pūrva i posledna	My first and last happiness
Ti zan men si dar ot raya	For me you are a gift from heaven
I būdi taka do kraya	And stay that way until the end!
Ti si izgrev za ochite	You are like dawn for my eyes
Moyat zvezden chas	My starry hour
I piyan ot obich peya	And I sing drunk with love
I za tebe az kopneya	And I yearn for you
Vinagi shte zhivee lyubovta vuv nas	Love will always live inside us
Chorus:	
Edin zhivot dvama s teb shte razdelim	We two will divide one life
Edin zhivot ne stiga nezhnostta da spodelim	One life isn’t enough for us to share our tenderness
Kato vyatūr pak me galyat tvoite kosi	Like wind, your hair caresses me
Kato ogūn dnes me palyat usnite ti nepoznati	Like fire today your unknown lips burn me
Chustvam ya – lyubovta ti	I feel it – your love
Iskam s obich da opiya tvoeto sūrtse	I want to become drunk with your heart
Tazi istinska magiya v sebe si, zapazi ya	Keep this magic within yourself
Az pred tebe shte razkriya novi svetove	I’ll uncover new worlds for you
Romani:	
Merava take, te kale jakhja mangav te dikhav	I die for you, I love to see your black eyes
Merava take, te lole vušta mangav te čumidav	I die for you, I love to kiss your red lips

The video depicts a male patron in a club watching Azis and Sofi belly-dance on stage (with a reference to pole dancing). The client snorts cocaine. Sofi and Azis are both wearing make-up and are similarly dressed in belly-dance outfits. Sofi shows her midriff and Azis wears a skirt over pants but the pants are cut-off, exposing one buttock. This video equalizes males and females as sex objects, and the patron seems equally interested in Azis and Sofi. On their part, they seem to vie for his attention – they hardly sing to each other but rather each sings to the patron. The males seem interested in each other just as much, if not more than they are in Sofi. Thus, instead of the standard heterosexual triangle (two males fighting over one woman), the video suggests other permutations.

I suggest that Azis is playing with both gender and ethnic stereotypes; he can be super feminine or super macho, super Gypsy or super non-ethnic. But the ways he

⁴⁹ See Azis and Sofi 2007.

⁵⁰ Dual language songs are fairly common among Romani and Turkish singers. Note that the song is in Phrygian mode and uses a *kyuchek* rhythm and typical arabesk instrumental fillers; the clarinet provides a powerful solo, employing a neutral second. The melody comes from a Turkish song.

combines these stereotypes is most fascinating. Often Azis adopts the standard Oriental stereotype but overlays it with a gendered stereotype of the super feminine. In many of his videos, however, *he* is the super feminine, which exposes the stereotype as constructed (in Judith Butler's terms, as "performative"). I am not suggesting that he is critical of Eastern stereotypes; rather, he loves play-acting – the Oriental is a fantasy world for him. But the Oriental is a different type of fantasy for a Romani transvestite man than for a mainstream *chalga* star. To phrase it differently, if he can be as Oriental as any *chalga* star, he can be as feminine; and if he can be as feminine, he has destabilized the categories. Despite his elaborate stagings, Azis is actually much more grounded in Romani music than most mainstream *chalga* stars; he sings live frequently; he consistently uses real guest musicians and gives them solos; and he features instrumental *kyucheks* on his albums, quite unheard of on the albums of the female mainstream stars.

In comparing Sofi Marinova with Azis, we can see that both artists faced exclusions early in their careers due to their ethnicity; as their careers matured, they both have publically and musically claimed their Romani identity. However, while Marinova has strategically enacted the mainstream non-ethnic heterosexual *chalga* bombshell (most recently for Eurovision 2012), Azis has not had this opportunity. Perhaps due to the stigma of his multiple and fluid marginalities (ethnic, sex, gender, sexuality) he has chosen a more radical direction.

Conclusion

In sum, Bulgarian popfolk can serve as an important window into ethnic relations and representational strategies. In *chalga* we see how debates about "Balkanism" are discursively expressed and enacted performatively, either embracing a new version of Ottoman pan-Balkan culture as cosmopolitan or rejecting it as Oriental and backward. In these debates, Roma occupy an especially charged position; they are demonized for lack of civility, yet lauded as genetically gifted musical performers. Livni notes that music is the prime medium through which Roma in Bulgaria can imagine themselves as a legitimate public, but, on the other hand, music reaffirms their stigma of being the backward Balkan other.⁵¹

Roma performers, then, occupy challenging terrain in Bulgaria. Whereas their musical styles have been appropriated into *chalga*, Roma themselves face high levels of prejudice and segregation in Bulgarian society. Some forms of mainstream *chalga* have become nationalistic and exclusionary, while other branches of *chalga* trade in orientalist fantasies. *Chalga* production companies are not run by Roma and Roma rarely have the power to determine their own representations. However, a few Romani stars, such as Azis and Sofi Marinova, have attained successful careers in mainstream *chalga*. Their negotiations offer a glimpse into the strategies of representation that Roma employ when trying to market themselves in a highly politicized context where the meanings of being Bulgarian, Balkan and European are contested.

⁵¹ Livni 2011.

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