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## NA ZDRAVJE! THE CULTURAL ROLE OF RAKIA IN MACEDONIA

I conducted my field studies in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). For comparison I use the literature concerning other Balkan countries (Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Croatia). In Macedonia many of the villages are isolated from others due to the geographical conditions and also a great part of so called traditional culture is pervading and influencing the culture of the cities, among other elements – rakia<sup>1</sup>. As I believe that occurs also in other Balkan countries, I attempt to extend my conclusions based on Macedonian material to the whole Balkan region. This essay concerns mainly the role of rakia in traditional Macedonian culture, I am also reflecting on how rakia participates in culture of contemporary Balkans.

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Rakia is a high-alcohol spirit (60-70% alcohol) produced through the distillation of young wine made of different fruits. In Macedonia rakia is mostly made of grapes, while Serbia and Montenegro are famous for their *shlivovica*, plum rakia. Bulgarian and Croatian rakia might be made as well of grapes, as of plums. In general it can be produced of any fruits that contain sugar, e.g. apples, apricots, pears.

The word ‘rakia’ comes from Turkish *raki* which means ‘strong vodka, distilled from fermented fruits and spiced with anise’ (Chirilovic 2002). Balkan rakia is not spiced with anise, although there exist anise flavoured beverages: Macedonian *mastika* and Greek *ouzo*. Only in Bulgaria, as noted by Ch. Vakarelski, ‘all vodkas are twice distilled and aromatised with anise seed’ (Vakarelski 1965: 66). The tradition of making rakia in the Balkans extends to XIV century and exists in almost all the countries in the region. At the beginning it was made only of grapes, that is of wine, and then also of other fruits (Chilirovic 2002).

The process of making rakia is highly complicated, it entails time and concern. After collecting and crushing in a special machine, the grapes are put into a barrel or another big container placed in a cellar, or generally somewhere cool, and left for slow fermentation. By the end of the first day, when the fruits are soaking with juice, *shira* (wine must) may be collected. It is a very sweet, thick syrup. Rest of the fruits remains untouched for the fermentation. After 20 days the wine is drained off, bottled and left in a cellar to mature. Then rakia is distilled of what was left in a barrel. Wine might be produced of grapes only, other fruits are suitable just for rakia [1]<sup>2</sup>.

Rakia should come cool from the barrel so the pipe it is flowing through is placed over a container with cold water. Temperature must be stable therefore it is necessary to carefully watch it. In the old times men were gathering to spend several hours watching over the distillation and tasting the final product from time to time. This is why, as Mr Ljupcho says, it is better when women take care of the whole process because the men *would drink it all at once. Sometimes it is even not well finished and it’s already drunk! In earlier times when someone was known for making good rakia, all his friends would have come and sit for hours. And everyone wanted to taste the rakia to check if it was already good. And before it was made, they were all completely drunk!* [2]. Usually the master was drinking the first glass of rakia when it was ready, and then he was giving it to the others [3].

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes this word is translated as ‘brandy’, but in my opinion there is not any good equivalent. At the same time I did not find better, thus I decided not to translate it.

<sup>2</sup> List of interviews can be found at the end of the text, p. 13.

Rakia is being drunk mostly in the morning, before eating. As every beverage with high alcohol content it improves digestion. In the morning, says S.M. Mijatovic, people drink very strong rakia from special, tiny glasses (bigger glasses are used for rakia with less alcohol content, the biggest for wine) (Mijatovic 1908: 78). Rakia is also drunk before dinner, as an aperitif and in the evenings.

In winter, and especially during winter holidays, sweet rakia is heated before serving (mac. *varena rakija*, serb. *grejanica*). Heated rakia is also an indispensable element of the wedding customs. It is also possible to use heated rakia externally (massaging throat and chest) as a medicine for colds.

Drinking rakia demands cultural knowledge and competence as rakia is a special, traditional beverage. Drinking rakia is usually connected with significant actions. The elementary one is saying “Cheers!” (Mac. “na zdravje!”, Serbian “zhiveli!” is also often used) while knocking the glasses and looking each other in the face. Knocking the glasses has an apotropaic meaning like knocking the red-coloured eggs at Easter. Both actions are intended to ward off evil spirits that could haunt the household (Knizevik 1997: 33). Looking in the face can be the way of showing openness, reducing the distance between people, and is prevalent not only in Macedonia, but in whole Balkan region.

My interviewees explained why one should look another in the face while knocking the glasses in different manners, e.g.: *Well, what does it look like when you knock the glass with somebody staring at the wall? It's rude. You must respect the one you are drinking with. You don't drink with just anyone, nor with your enemy, but with your friend. And when you're not looking him in the face that means you're saying "Cheers" dishonestly, that you don't really think so* [2]. My interviewees stressed that looking in the face of those they are drinking with means honesty, respect and attention [4]. Furthermore, in Macedonia and other Balkan countries, it is often said that omitting to look in companion's face negatively affects one's sexual life. According to one woman it brings seven years of unsuccessful sexual life [5], another woman from Skopje reckons it is five years [6].

The way of drinking rakia is an essential element in the process of communication. Drinking skills, e.g. sipping or looking in the face while knocking the glasses, determine one's affiliation or exclusion from the culture. Rakia is mostly drunk at home so inviting a visitor to drink it means including him/her in the community (Knizevik 1997, p. 36 - 37).

In the past production of rakia was only men's domain: men were planting grape-vine, men were cutting them, men were distilling rakia – and mostly men were drinking it. Kuzman Sapkarev underlines that during the wedding men and women were sitting at separate tables with food and beverages (*trpeza*) (Shapkarev 1976: 41).

One of my interviewees connects separating masculine and feminine in this particular culture with Turkish inheritance: *In the old times (...) women were not coming into cafes or bars at all (...). It stayed so from the Turkish times, where the woman is treated in another way. It is changing, but still women do not go to the bars alone too often. Even young girls, you rarely meet them in bars alone (...). But at home there is no problem. Women drink with men, especially those old ones, who are most respected* [2].

This information is confirmed by J. Obrebski who observed during his field study in Porec (western Macedonia) that women favoured in their social group are allowed to drink with men, e.g.: “she (medicine woman – K.B.) gets the privileges (...) that belong to men only (...) she can freely stay among men, sit at their table, drink vodka with them (...) she can even use gross words which is allowed only to men” (Obrebski 1972: 209 – 210).

Today, as declared by my interviewees, both men and women can plant vine, distil rakia and drink it together. In my opinion stressing these “equal rights” exists mainly in the declarative sphere of my interviewees. I know from my own experience that not always are women allowed to drink rakia in presence of men – during an interview in village Prilepec

near Prilep a woman brought rakia for her husband and (male) neighbour whilst pouring juice for me and herself. She also brought coffee for all. I got similar information from PhD T. Strączek.

Although this is not officially forbidden for women to make or drink rakia, it is assumed by custom to be the men's domain.

#### *Rakia in traditional culture*

Rakia – and wine which cannot be separated from rakia in the church ceremonial – plays an important role in ritual actions, it is a part of so called folk religiosity. Most activities connected with cultivating vine and drinking alcohol in particular days may be interpreted in terms of the festivity (as understood by R. Caillois and M. Eliade). These activities are included in the religiosity which bounds official Orthodox faith with traditional beliefs and magical practices.

Wine has a special role in ceremonial of both official and folk religiosity. Red wine as a symbol of Christ's blood is an essential part of Eucharist and therefore is perceived to be sacred. Rakia, metonymically connected with wine because of its grape origin, takes over some of its sacredness. In traditional society rakia was not that important, and especially not in religiosity. It was believed to be related with Satan (Maksimovic 1924) contrary to wine which was associated with God. Nowadays there are many situations when rakia substitutes wine.

Within Orthodox liturgy Eucharist is received in both forms – bread and wine. Sacredness or at least difference of wine among other alcohol beverages is clearly visible in keeping fasts. This also confirms my theory of metonymic connection between wine and rakia. According to many of my interviewees this is allowed to drink alcohol during the fasts, except for wine and rakia made of grapes: *You know, rakia may be made of plums. If you have home-made rakia, you know it's of plums, you can drink it. But it's mostly made of grapes, and if you drink such, you break the fast and you're in sin* [7]. Another woman explained: *you do not dare to drink wine nor eat grapes while you fast, (...) 'cause wine is made of grapes. You are to take the holy communion and you take it of wine of grapes* [8]. Mr Nikola from Strumica points the days when this is allowed or forbidden to drink wine: *there is a fast when you can drink wine. This is a fast when you can [use] wine and oil. This is a petrovski fast<sup>3</sup>, apostles' fasts as we call them. And for the fast before Golema Bogorodica<sup>4</sup> you can drink wine* [9]. But he adds that people do not observe this. Then again monks drink only red wine, no other alcohol – irrespective of if there is a fast or not.

Grapevine is among most common plants grown in Macedonia therefore its cultivation is a part of traditional ceremonial annual cycle. Activities related to particular stages of cultivation take place in special times of year, when the seasons are changing – during solstices and equinoxes. Thus this is the time of sacrum, predestined for creation of the Universe and "repeating the time of the beginnings", reconstructing of the mythical time, *illud tempus*, when gods' and heroes' actions were sustaining unchangeable cycle of life (Eliade 1993: 99).

My interviewees do not know the special festive day when grapevine should be planted. It is only known that this is done in autumn, after vintage. In winter, to be precise in February, vine is interlocked. This is connected with the most popular Macedonian but also other Balkan countries' holiday, the day of St. Triphon the Drunk (Macedonian "Sveti Trifun/ Tripun/ Pijanica", Serbian Trifun/ Trifon, Bulgarian Trifon), patron of wine and vine, and also rakia. It is observed 14<sup>th</sup> February.

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<sup>3</sup> The fast before the days of Peter and Paul, the Holy Apostles, this is the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> July. All dates of the festive are given here according to the Orthodox calendar (Makedonski pravoslaven kalendar, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> The fast before the Dormition of Virgin Mary (15<sup>th</sup> August).

According to legend, St. Triphon lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. He was a healer and exorcist from Frygia. The 17 year-old Triphon healed the daughter of the Roman Emperor Gordian and in doing so, gained great glory and respect. He was martyred in Nice during Diocletian's persecution (Kitevski 1998). To understand the activities of the Day of St. Triphon, this is more important to know the folk version of the legend. As Mrs Bogdana from village Tursko Rudari near Probishtip in central Macedonia recounted: *He took care of the grapes and wine. Old people used to say he was a brother to Virgin Mary. Once he was cutting the vine and Virgin Mary told him to be careful as he could cut his nose off. He told her not to disturb him, that nothing wrong would happen, and then, the same moment, he cut his nose off* [10]. Therefore people repeat what the saint done in *illo tempore*. In another legend, mentioned by the authors of "Serbian mythological dictionary" (*Srpski mitoloshki rechnik*, I will use the abbreviation SMR), it is told that in a day of St. Triphon's death all insects destroying vines were killed hence the vine-growers chose him for a saint patron (SMR 1970: 286).

There are numerous magical activities and practices undertaken at the Day of St. Triphon meant to bewitch yield and fertility. Most popular, appearing in all relations that I got, is blessing the vine by priest or laypeople sprinkling the branches with holy water. Then men cut grapevines; each householder does it in his own vineyard although sometimes when the priest is not cutting the first branch they choose a *kum* to do this: *We bring there [to the vineyard – K.B.] a pie with a coin inside and cut a piece for everyone. Who gets the piece with a coin becomes the kum of all grapevines in the village. And he is cutting these vines* [11].

Nowadays whole families go to the vineyards, but in the past – and in some regions till today – only men were going there for this holiday. According to my female interviewee from Struga these women whose husbands drink too much should stay at home at the Day of St. Triphon and omit work *to make their husbands not to drink* [12]. Usually three branches are cut and, as I heard in Valandovo, tied with some red ribbon (my interviewee didn't know why the ribbon should be red, however, I assume it may be related with red being a symbol of fertility as well as having apotropaic power). Branches are left in vineyard [13].

Another practice to bewitch yield is pouring rakia or wine under grapevine twigs. My interviewees related burying the bottle of rakia or wine, then digging it off and drinking the next year while burying another bottle.

In southern Macedonia it is often said that the Day of St. Triphon is the first day of spring and for that reason people try to foretell the weather for next months. In Gevgelia they say: "Sveti Trifun seche <sup>5</sup>, ama na leto mirisa" ("St. Triphon cuts, but it smells the summer"). There are similar customs in Serbia and Bulgaria (compare: Pirinski Kraj i Antić, Zupanc 1988).

The day of St. Triphon is one of so called "heavy days" when this is forbidden to work at all. As R. Caillois theory of the holiday states: "festive day is devoted to the divine – people must not work, but should rest and rejoice" (Caillois 1995: 110).

Harvesting of the grapes is done in the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. Before the holiday of Transfiguration of Jesus Christ (*Preobraženje Gospodne*, 19<sup>th</sup> August) it is not allowed to eat grapes: *for Transfiguration grapes are brought to the church, grapes are blessed in a church. This is in August. And till that day you cannot eat red grapes. (...) Red grapes not, whites you can eat. Until Transfiguration red grapes cannot be eaten. But who knows about it, many do not know. Those who have grapes, bring them to the church, vladica is blessing them. And everyone is given a grape, two grapes. As a blessing. And then we start buying red grapes.* [question: why this applies to red grapes only – K.B.] *This is for the reason blood is red. This is related to the Christ's blood* [14]. Day of Transfiguration is

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<sup>5</sup> This is a word game: Macedonian word "seche" is related both with frost and cutting the grapevines.

assumed to be the beginning of autumn, e.g. authors of the “Etnologia na Makedoncite” report this is a day when birds start leaving for warmer regions (Etnologia... 1996: 239). Thereof symbolically the day of St. Triphon and bewitching yield opens the vegetative season and first vintage closes it.

Days of opening and closing vegetative season are holidays as described in R.Caillois’ theory. These are the times when traditionally myths were reactualized because, as Caillois writes, “holiday is connected with solstices in the cycle of the seasons of the year” (Caillois 1995: 118).

Winter is the time when farming ceases, crops are collected and people are resting after year. In Macedonian ceremonial calendar wintertime starts at November 8<sup>th</sup> at the day of St. Dmitri (*Mitrovden*). Then warmed rakia is drunk for the first time in a year, e.g. at *slava* in Valandovo where St. Dmitri is a patron saint of the local church. Warmed rakia is being drunk during all significant winter holidays – the day of St. Nicholas, *Vasilica*, Christmas, *Vodici*, and also, as reported by my interviewee, when it snows for the first time that year [2].

Rakia and wine are believed to be both apotropaic symbols and mediums in communicating with the dead, for that reason they are present not only during the funeral and funeral meal, but also at every *slava* and always when visiting the graves. J. Derlicki writes “this is the way [by alcohol mediation – K.B.] relatives are connecting with their deceased, they are coming into contact with him, creating a bridge between real and afterlife world” (Derlicki 2000: 286).

In Orthodox religiosity this is still a custom to bring food and beverages to the graveyard. Church condemns this practice since laypeople treat it as more important than prayer [15], but despite Church’s official statements this is commonly practised. Bread, wheat and wine (or rakia) are mainly brought. My interviewee explained: *The most important are wine and wheat. Most important. Wine is the blood of Christ, bread and grain are His body* [12]. Another interviewee, a priest, explained that wheat is a symbol of resurrection of the dead [16].

Food brought to the graveyard is eaten by the family. Only wine or rakia is poured over the grave for the sake of the soul. In opinion of Z Szromba-Rysowa spilling of remaining wine is an echo of past libations offered in worship to gods (1981: 172). Rest of wine (rakia) is drunk, but those who drink do not say “Cheers” [17].

People bring food to the graveyard at holidays, usually on Saturdays as this day of the week is dedicated to the deceased, but also for Christmas and Easter. Still the most important day for communicating with the dead is *Duchovden* (Descent of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost). It is believed that dead can show themselves to their living relatives this day. According to the popular belief spirits remain on earth since Easter till Pentecost and then return to the world of the dead. My interviewee says: *If one would like to see [a ghost – K.B.] for example someone of his family, he should go to the graveyard early in the morning and bring the bottle of wine or rakia. And then on this bottle the shape of this person could appear* [18]. Alcohol is a medium able to connect two worlds, moreover its apotropaic power protects the living from dangerous influence of the dead.

*Slavas*, feasts dedicated to the saint patron of a house, village or person, are also related to the cult of the dead. *Slava* is dedicated to the saint patron hence it is a part of folk religiosity, yet it serves a significant social function – integrates the community by bringing together its members.

Those who celebrate the particular day bring the food to the church for consecration and then hand it out to others. Several kinds of bread, among them a special festive cake *kolach*, wine and rakia are indispensable. Rakia can be consecrated in church since the priest is allowed to consecrate anything, furthermore as I stated before rakia is somehow of divine origin inasmuch as it is made of wine which is assumed sacred. Rakia may be also presented

as a gift to the priest. I bought wine “Smederevka” in the monastery sv. Spas in Kavadarci, the householder explained such wine might have healing effects [19].

*Slava* may be also organised by a monastery, and then devoted to its patron saint or other saints connected with the cloister or nearby village (usually there are several *slavas* observed in a monastery). Concerning such events monks or landlords make rakia on their own. This kind of rakia is assumed to have healing powers and – as home-made ones – is greatly esteemed. Well known for its taste and curing abilities is rakia “Prepork” produced in monastery of St. Naum in Ochrid. It is made of grapes with an addition of propolis [15]. Similar rakia is distilled by the monks of Slepche near Demir Hisar (Bitola surroundings). In the same monastery as father igumen Serafin told me another special type of rakia is made, the healing one with twelve herbs (mostly healing herbs as camomile, nettle, thyme) [20].

Sweet, heated rakia is being drunk during winter holidays as stated before, nevertheless regardless of the season of the year rakia is heated in the third day of a wedding, that is a day when bride moves into groom’s house. At present time it is usually on Monday, in past traditional wedding that was Wednesday, after the first postnuptial night. My interviewees from Negotino and Prilep explained that rakia is served heated to *make the wife sweet* [21] and [2]. Naturally if the bride turned out to be impure before the wedding, warmed rakia was not served, and the groom could send dishonoured girl home (Shapkarev 1976: 82).

In every Macedonian, and generally Balkan, home coffee and rakia are essential to receive guests. One of my interviewees, Doncho, student from Skopje said: *Among us, if you visit someone first question you hear is: How are you?, and the second: What would you like to drink? You always have to keep coffee and rakia at home, maybe some juice too* [22]. S.M. Mijatović shares this opinion: “The meal without drinking, especially without rakia, doesn’t count” (Mijatovic 1908: 66).

Macedonians and other Balkan nations often stress their hospitality. And indeed this is not only in a declarative sphere. Vuk Karadzhić’s words: “Today a priest, tomorrow a monk, and later even the Turk or a beggar” (Karadzhić 1969: 354) are true also in today Macedonia. Present situation in the Balkans lessens the trust for strangers however hospitality is still a basic part of auto stereotype.

All my interviewees stressed the prestige of home-made rakia. Vishnja, a student from Belgrad, said: *Well at my home we never buy rakia in a store! Home-made rakia is much better and appreciated. Everyone has his own way to make rakia thus it is always different and unique* [17]. I heard similar opinions from my other interviewees.

Rakia is strongly associated with the house since it “participates” in the process of building. According to the observations made by M.Pokropek and T.Strączek in Jablanica, western Macedonia, when building of the house begins “Chief foreman hits the ground with a pick saying: Arlija! [wish of luck]. When he thrusts the pick in the ground the process of building is begun. Then the landlord offers rakia to all the workers and spills some of it on the ground, he pours rakia over the future foundation” (Pokropek, Strączek 1992, p. 123). Similarly when the house is finished perviousness of the chimney is symbolically checked. After constructing a chimney and a stove “foreman asks householder for the 1-litre bottle of rakia, then bounds a bunch of *zdravec* [geranium – K.B.] to it (...) The bottle is then tied with a rope. Foreman puts it into *odzhak* [fireplace – K.B.] while others are pulling the rope, lifting the bottle through the chimney to the roof” (Strączek 2001: 163). Sometimes a pot with wine was used instead of the bottle. T.Strączek explains these practices are supposed to protect people from unfriendly *sacrum*. When consciousness is lessened with alcohol men feel safer.

#### *Rakia in contemporary culture*

Traditional practices, beliefs and attitude towards rakia influences contemporary city culture in many ways. Furthermore rakia being an element of tradition serves as for particular

regions, e.g. in Kavadarci (Tikvešija region, southern Macedonia) people celebrate “Tikveshki Grozdober”, a holiday symbolically opening the vintage season. Festivities last for three days, in 2003 it was 5 – 7<sup>th</sup> September, including additional commercial events, e.g. folk costumes display, archaeological exhibition in local museum, paintings exposition and likewise.

Main celebration – carnival – is held on Sunday. This is a parade along the main street inspired by several cultural sources: ancient Greece (bandwagon with Greek columns, girls wearing ancient costumes and holding bottles of wine, young man on a throne drinking from the wineglass), folk culture (old lady in a folk costume weaving, folk musicians), French cabaret (theatre group “Moulin Rouge” from Bulgaria), contemporary *Love Parade* (young people in colourful outfits, loud techno and disco music). There are also two wagons where the whole process of making rakia can be observed – from vintage through barrel resting till distilling.

The most important part of the festival is the symbolical inauguration of the vintage. A king with his court comes onto the stage decorated with vine branches, speaks about past winemaking traditions of Tikvešija and then cuts off the first branch.

Influences of ancient Greek culture are significant here. People of Kavadarci are very proud of their tradition rooted in ancient Mediterranean culture. “Tikveshki Grozdober” of 2003 was accompanied by an exhibit presenting archaeological sites in Tikveshija and a collection documenting winemaking traditions of the region. The carnival also resembles Greek Dionysia or Bacchanalia. What is interesting few years ago this was Bacchus<sup>6</sup>, not the king, cutting the first grapevine branch.

Another city festival that stresses the connection between rakia and local tradition is “rakiada”, a contest in making rakia. People from culture centre in Valandovo have already organised such a contest twice. “Rakiada” takes place in October hence this is after the vintage, during the customary time of distilling rakia. My interviewee, Mrs Maria, reported the event: *Men gather in the morning on the playing field, each brings his own pot to boil rakia and the products needed. And then they all make rakia. At the end rakia is judged, which is the best, that is which is the strongest, the tastiest and the one who wins gets the prize* [23]. Products are judged by experts from Skopje who examine percentage and containment. Macedonian television and radio come to report the event. Only men are making rakia, women come after it is finished and already judged. Festival ends with common dances. Similar event takes place in Vojvodina in village Kovilj, but has a longer tradition there – in 2003, 29<sup>th</sup> June, the contest was held for the 7<sup>th</sup> time. Experts from Novi Sad were judging the taste and alcohol percentage. According to the ads in local papers<sup>7</sup>, the event was accompanied by a folk group from Kovilj and musicians playing traditional instruments (e.g. “gajda”) from Serbia and Vojvodina.

Rakia may be also presented as a tourist attraction. In rakia factory “Bojkovchanka” in Rakovica near Belgrad tourists can visit the museum of rakia, the only one in the world according to the company’s manager Zoran Simic, and the gallery “Etno-Centrum”. There is also a store where visitors can buy, at a very high price, rakia “Bojkovchanka” in hand-made bottles. Simic stressed that rakia is made in a traditional and natural way, grapes are collected manually, and a process of distillation has not changed in last seven centuries. Visitors are invited to an exhibition of *kazans* [pots] for making rakia, different bottles and jugs. Moreover the factory itself is open to the public to let the visitor experience the secrets of making rakia [24].

One of the most popular sectors of tourism in the Balkans – in Serbia, Croatia and Bulgaria (Macedonia being the least tourism-wise developed country of the region) – is the

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<sup>6</sup> Not Dionysus- Latin version of this god’s name was used.

<sup>7</sup> [www.glas-javnosti.co.yu/rakija.htm](http://www.glas-javnosti.co.yu/rakija.htm)

so-called *selski* (*seoski* in Serbian and Croatian) *turizam*. It is a branch of farm tourism, i.e. the type of tourism which aims at familiarizing the vacationers with folk culture of the area. As expected, many elements of the 'local life' are staged; for instance the Serbian travel agency Etno Art Travel, among its other offers, gives you the opportunity to witness the preparation of *rakia*. In this performance the entire traditional process of distilling *rakia* is played out for the tourists. However, the entire presentation does not take place when it traditionally should, that is during the harvest time, but in the tourist season.

In the tourist offers I have analyzed there were numerous chances to take part in the life of the community visited, such as the gathering of grapes or olives, or preparing local meals ([www.chorwacja.biz](http://www.chorwacja.biz)). *Rakia*, the wines and various meals are a very important component of this localness and tradition. For instance in an itinerary of a trip to Croatia one will find out that 'At their arrival, the travelers will be presented with *travarica* (*rakia*) made of as many as 55 various local herbs, then they will be treated to homemade wine and grape *rakia* (*lozovaca*), whose remarkable tang is obtained only after mistletoe leaves are soaked in it for 45 days' ([www.chorwacja.biz/strony/agro.htm](http://www.chorwacja.biz/strony/agro.htm)). In the very same farmhouse one can also taste traditional Croatian cuisine. Correspondingly, one can find Serbian web pages recommending farm tourism ([www.turizam.co.yu/selo](http://www.turizam.co.yu/selo)).

Promoting *rakia* as a tourist attraction as well as merchandise is most frequent in those countries whose tourist business is well-developed, mainly in Croatia. Macedonia, the chief object of my research, is of hardly any significance in this respect. Therefore I do not feel sufficiently competent as to elaborate on this subject; I wish to draw attention to the problem and leave it as a focus for further analysis.

### *Summary and conclusions*

In this article I tried to portray the significance of *rakia* in the Balkan culture, both traditional and contemporary, in town as well as in the countryside, for elders and for the youngsters. I conducted my field studies predominantly among orthodox Macedonians, however after further literary studies, I tried to project my conclusions onto a wider, overall Balkan range.

Whilst analyzing particular aspects of these cultures, I noticed that *rakia* takes part in many important or even most important moments of life of an individual and a community. It is more than a mere element of feasts; it has a significant symbolic facet – as it is used in magical practices ensuring luck or successful human relations (drinking *rakia* during wedding receptions). The grape *rakia*, metonymically linked with wine, is employed in religious practices, including those involving contact with the dead.

Furthermore, like wine, *rakia* has certain apotropaic uses, ensuring people safety. It is a chiefly 'male' beverage (it is them who drink and distil it in most cases, as well as row the grapes), nonetheless the women as well play some part in its drinking and production. In certain circumstances even Muslims drink *rakia*, even though the Koran forbids them to drink alcohol.

Many functions of *rakia* have been transferred into town culture, sometimes directly - by the people who moved from the countryside to town, bringing their habits with them. Hence, in towns *rakia* is traditionally bought at the market, rather than at a supermarket, so it is homemade. Additionally, *rakia* is associated with many town celebrations which depict a certain event as characteristic for a given place. The use of *rakia* in the aforementioned celebrations – and the key part it plays in the "rakiadas" or the Kavardarci carnival – is a sign of its relation with the culture and tradition of the given towns and provinces. In the era of global culture, it has become one of the Balkans' trademarks, an element of their 'market identity', and a tourist attraction. In contrast to the equally popular wine, *rakia* is one of the

distinctive features of the Balkan region, and basing upon this very distinctiveness it helps create a special 'Balkan' identity.

List of interviews and informants:

1. Danka (about 50 years old), Kavadarci, 6. 09. 2003.
2. Ljupcho (about 50), monastery of St. Dmitri, Selce near Prilep, 9. 09. 2003.
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