

Bunjevci: Origins, Destinies, Identities

The opening chapter titled **Who are Bunjevci?** gives a brief overview of the latest historical research into the Croatian (sub)ethnic group of Bunjevci, their migrations to Northern Dalmatia, Primorje (the Croatian Littoral), Lika, Gorski Kotar (Mountain District) and the Danube area (today – Serbia and Hungary) and their respective identities in the given historical context. The next chapter of the same title discusses the **Theoretical Framework, Sources and Research Approaches**. The author of the book takes new steps aiming to unite earlier and the latest understandings of the Bunjevci ethnic and cultural heritage. The road to those understandings was paved by two projects led by the author – *The Identity and Ethnogenesis of the Primorje Bunjevci* (2003-2006) and *The Identity and Ethnocultural Shaping of Bunjevci* (2008-2013). The book aims to conclude a quite a number of years spent researching the Bunjevci traditional and contemporary culture, their ethnocultural shaping and their identities, and finally, based upon those understandings, to propose well-founded hypotheses and try to interpret their origins, destinies and multiple identities, primarily relying on ethnological evidence. For this purpose, the author turns to thematic classification and detailed analyses of specific cultural elements, primarily comparing them in all the Bunjevci branches as well as in a context of a wider area. Thus with the knowledge of their territorial distribution one gains an insight into historical processes influencing the ethnocultural processes of shaping the Bunjevci as a subethnic group over a longer stretch of time. All of those cultural elements work together to gradually form a fine mosaic which makes a solid foundation for interpreting origins, destinies and identities of this (sub)ethnic group over a longer period of time in history up to the present time. Determination of a characteristic distribution of the observed phenomena on the territory of Southeast Europe (alongside some other phenomena already previously determined) lays a good foundation for their diachronic research with the use of hermeneutical historical approach commonly known as the cultural historical method. The research is based on fieldwork carried out by the author and her associates as part of the projects mentioned above. It rests upon a specific method according to which the ethnographers on the field go back and forth from observation to analysis and vice versa because the data they find propose the theory they use and it, in turn, directs collecting the data; therefore, it is a two-way complementary process – not induction, nor deduction, but retroduction. In this manner, certain specific cultural elements previously determined are being checked by multiple fieldwork carried out on the same sites in all Bunjevci branches and consequently a lot of important data is confirmed, which would not be possible without the retroductive approach. In the chapter titled **Territorial Context of Comparative Research into Phenomena pertaining to Bunjevci Wedding Customs** the author explains the reason for covering the whole region of Southeast Europe. Previous research has already suggested that special attention be drawn towards cultural elements characteristic of the Bunjevci that most probably came into existence

through contact with the Vlachs, Romance-speaking nomad people indigenous to the Balkans. Therefore, the comparative analyses also focus on cultural elements and practices observed by the Vlachs of the Pindus in northern Greece (Samarina and the surrounding Vlach area) and those inhabiting north east Serbia. Within the given framework of research the next chapter gives **An Overview and Critique of References and Sources** and a brief chapter titled **On Terms Used** offers the author's explanation of the terms *custom* and *ritual* in the context of the discussed wedding customs.

The central part of the book is dedicated to **Selected Phenomena within Wedding Customs** which comprise three separate chapters. Two of the phenomena discussed here share almost identical territorial distribution. The first chapter titled **The Wedding Role of the Best Man** consists of several subheadings that examine various specific aspects of the role of the best man. After introducing the topic, the author analyzes comparatively his role of a wedding witness as combined with other wedding party members, as well as the names, his general role (including the role of the wedding master, his duty and the role of the bride's protector) and the choice of the best man. These four chapters are documented in thematic ethnographic maps which offer a more complete insight into the distribution of the elements in Former Yugoslavia. In addition, textual analyses are added for the rest of Southeast Europe. The chapters also discuss the role of the best man's female companion as well as his assistant. A separate section is reserved for the specific elements of the role of the best man: the obligation of inviting him first to the wedding, collecting him and the gift from him, seeing him off, the first visit paid to the best man after the wedding and finally visiting him and gift-giving for some of the most important holidays during the year. In her final remarks on the role of the best man, the author points to the processes of his development from a wedding witness to the key wedding party member within all the Bunjevci branches. As shown by indicators of the distribution of the best man role, primarily as a wedding master (and the bride's protector, too), the manner of choosing him and certain specific elements of his role – the best man as such might have originated in the area around the border of Dalmatia and the neighbouring western Herzegovina and western Bosnia. However, the data suggest that the actual area might be even more to the southeast of the mentioned one, encompassing a wider south Adriatic-Dinaric border region: this phenomena has been confirmed alongside the entire border – from Sinjska Krajina and Livanjsko Polje (the Livno Field), across the Neretva River delta, peninsula of Pelješac, the entire South Dalmatia, all the way down to Boka Kotorska (The Bay of Kotor) and the Montenegrin coast with the hinterland. The analyses of the elements of the best man's role suggest that this specific role has derived from his primary one – of a wedding witness, further developing by meeting and intertwining with pre-Slavic, Slavic and Christian cultural layers on the territory of Southeast Europe. Within the Primorje-Lika Bunjevci and The Danube area Bunjevci branch the term best man (*kum*) has been widened thus shaping a new wedding honour attendant's role that came about by interla-

cing similar elements of two other roles – the one of Slavic origin termed *stari svat* (chief attendant) and another of Romanian (Vlach) origin – *nun*. Finally, in the new wedding role of *kum*, formed as a result, the elements of the Vlach role of *nun* gradually prevailed.

The second chapter is titled **Specific Forms of Gift Giving**. It is divided into several subheadings, one of which is: Bringing Cake and Other Gifts to the Future Bride Prior to the Wedding – wherein the author considers the following elements: the content and the form of gift giving, the specific terms used for the visits and the visitors/gift givers, as well as comparability between the two practices of gift giving – the one before and the other after the wedding, which is obligatory. Other subheadings follow: The Obligation of the Groom's Family to Present the Bride with a Wedding Dress; Presenting the Bride with a Cake and/or Other Gifts for Major Holidays After the Wedding; Collecting Money onto the Cake; A Gift of Money Given to the Bride in Exchange for a Kiss.

The third chapter covers **Specific Wedding Customs and Rituals** as follows: Specific Elements Pertaining to Water within Wedding Customs (watercrossing in front of the bride's and/or the groom's home, toppling a pot of water, as well as the correlation between the two practices); The Bride Entering the Groom's Home by Treading on White Linen/Rug; Separating the Newlyweds or the Bride from the Rest of the Wedding Party; Separating the Male from Female Wedding Party Members; Specific Elements Pertaining to the Apple within Wedding Customs (an apple extended as an invitation to the wedding and the practice of halving an apple); Two Distinctive Beliefs regarding the Wedding Procession (an encounter of two brides; the bride looking back in the wedding procession); A Brief Overview of the Phenomena aside from the Selected Topics and the Final Remarks on the Selected Topics within Wedding Customs.

In the **Final Remarks** the author gives an overview of the **Processes of Developing the Territorial Mosaic of Specific Elements of the Examined Phenomena within Bunjevci Traditional Culture**. Through analyses of specific elements of the Bunjevci wedding customs, as well as their distribution on the territory of Southeast Europe, the author aims to interpret the knowledge behind the mosaic pieced together in this way, element by element, thus taking on a recognizable physiognomy. In this manner one can determine the particular area of their interfusion with the Vlach elements on one hand and the way they were spreading on the other hand. Various specific elements of the Bunjevci wedding customs, examined in the previous chapters, make the body and the content of this mosaic. They also point to the manner of their development and origins, as well as the directions of their spreading. The chapter titled **Territorial Distribution of a Combination of Specific Elements of Bunjevci Wedding**, which is determined based on the analyses of the source material given in the middle chapters of the book, shows distribution of the cultural elements with the aim of specifying potential original homeland of the Bunjevci and the ways their cultural assets were passed on further north and west. The latter is discussed in the

final overview given in **Final Remarks on the Potential Origins of Bunjevci**, where the author points to possible points of origin of the Bunjevci and proposes the following: based on ethnological, linguistic and certain historical indicators the origin of the Bunjevci Croats should be looked for on the territory of the so called Red Croatia. Regardless of whether this entity, which is now part of Montenegro, is historically founded (it is not up to ethnologists to deal with these issues), there seem to be grounds for it in ethnic sense, considering the traces left by Croats on this territory. Since as early as Slavs came to the south, they might have started to assimilate the local Romance population (perhaps even Albanian in part), and this process might have continued later on due to Vlachs' nomadic migrations towards the Adriatic. The expansion of the Serbian state into this region propelled ethnic and linguistic changes in population structure and Croats were pushed further towards the sea, where they still reside today (The Bay of Kotor). A part of the population left the area moving further northeast for the Neretva River, only to join similar local Croatian population fostering the Ekavian accent, while the rest of population that stayed gradually adopted the Ijekavian accent. In addition, one can assume that precisely from the ranks of this part of Croatian population that was pushed forward from the farthest Croatian ethnic frontier, thus saving their characteristic Ikavian accent, rose a distinctive Croatian sub(ethnic) group – the Bunjevci. Assimilation of the local Romance population might have come about and ended even earlier in their original habitat or this process might have continued on the new territories that were inhabited by the Bunjevci Croats in the course of their transition (regardless of whether the very ethnonym *Bunjevac* existed at the time or not – which is not possible to determine without any historical documents available). With the new Vlach elements coming from the southeast the total population of the region came into contact with Vlach heritage once again. Therefore, it is not possible to separate clearly the Bunjevci from the rest of Croatian (sub) ethnic groups. Since the Bunjevci-Vlach common elements are present at the very place considered to be the potential point of origin of Croats, one can assume that their assimilation of the indigenous population found in the region, as well as their mutual cultural influence, took place for the most part in that very region. It is not possible to determine precisely how long this group of Croats resided at their supposed point of origin or when exactly they transited towards and across the Neretva River. They might have lived at this farthest Croatian frontier since the time the first Slavic settlers came to the region, until as late as the 13th century. Due to Serbian expansion at the time, they might have left their original home gradually migrating westward towards western Herzegovina, western Bosnia and the neighbouring Dalmatian Hinterland, wherein historical evidence of their presence can be found. Also, some of them might have stayed for some time or even settled along the way between the Bay of Kotor and the Neretva river. Certain ethnological indicators point to their presence in the mentioned area. It might be worthwhile investigating whether there is any trace of any Bunjevci surnames, to add to the existing evidence of their presence in that area as well – all the way down to their supposed point of origin, according to the latest ethnological indicators. The

process of their further development and shaping into a distinctive ethnic group might have continued through their contact with similar Croatian population of the area they migrated to. The traces of cultural elements found in the area suggest that the farthest Bunjevci frontier might be not far away from the Bunë River (Albanian name for the Bojana River) and that the groups of Croats that in time became known as Bunjevci might have resided between the two Buna Rivers once. One would be in the south, on the border with Albania, and the other is the well known rivulet commonly associated with Bunjevci, flowing into the Neretva River from the east. Many researchers tried to derive the ethnonym Bunjevac from the name of the Buna River. Folk tradition is also in favour of this interpretation and perhaps folk etymology should not be completely dismissed when searching for the Bunjevci origin, for it is a testimony of a historical memory, especially since the ethnological indicators also confirm the Bunjevci traces in the wider area between the two Buna rivers. Back in the 1980s the author heard an account in Baja (Hungary) that Bunjevci came from Albania, which at the time she deemed quite unlikely. When it comes to folk (oral) tradition, it is sometimes difficult to separate the real from the imagined. However, in the light of the latest ethnological findings, the claim does not seem so unlikely any longer. Ethnological indicators point to traces of Bunjevci very near the ethnic Albanians' territory.

Based on everything said above, the author finds that ethnological indicators have given new clues for determining the process of ethnocultural shaping of Bunjevci. Starting from the given assumption, it seems that further ethnological, historical, linguistic, anthroponymic, demographic, topographic and anthropological research might provide additional evidence for the proposed ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic processes in the new supposed original home of the Bunjevci. The author finishes her book by giving an overview of **Correlation between Identities, Ethnocultural/Ethnogenetic Processes of Shaping Bunjevci in a Historical Perspective**. In the overall territory settled by the Bunjevci today subjective aspects of their identity are more pronounced precisely in those areas where their cultural heritage is better preserved. Although the latter is partly kept only in collective memory, this too serves as an important indicator of the processes of ethnocultural shaping of the Bunjevci, forging their identities and finally their destinies.