

REVIEW

by Prof Anelia Yaneva, PhD
South-West University "Neofit Rilski"
Institute for Arts Studies at BAS

related to a procedure announced by AMDFA (Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts),
for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"
to Svilen Krastev Hristov,
full-time doctoral student at the Department of Choreography,
with Academic supervisor Prof Daniela Dzheneva
Professional direction 8.3. – Music and dance art

The doctoral candidate Svilen Hristov was discharged with the right to defense on 16.12.2019, and on 25.11.2022 he was invited to public defense. Svilen Hristov receives Bachelor's degree in Bulgarian Folk Choreography in 2000 from Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar", and in 2011 Master's degree as Choreographer-Director at AMDFA-Plovdiv. During the period 1986-1999, he is a dancer at SMK-Varna under the direction of Hristo Ignatov. Subsequently, he is the choreographer and leader of the Folklore Ensemble Gergana - Varna and participates in the cultural events of the city with a number of productions (for example, the folklore performances *Forget Me Not*, *By the Sea My Love*, *Mother's Curse*, *With Love*).

Svilen Hristov's dissertation is dedicated to a little-studied topic - *Influence of the Vayats on shaping the style and character of the dance folklore from Varna Region*. According to the candidate, the dissertation includes 10 chapters, an introduction and a conclusion, consisting of 230 pages of text and 27 pages of photographic material (Appendix) - a total of 257 pages (I quote the abstract).

I personally count these chapters in a different way, since I do not think that the purpose, objectives and methods of the research, as well as the publications on the topic can be counted as **two chapters**, this usually is a part of the Introduction. I also do not think that the final texts – *Studied and described people and dances from Varna region* (VII), *List of Informants* (VIII), *Dictionary of Unknown Words* (IX) and *Literature Used and Cited* (X) can be counted as **four chapters**, as they are rather appendices. So, of the announced ten chapters, **three main chapters** are essential, to which the introduction and the final conclusion are naturally included.

In the first chapter (third, according to the candidate), *Historical information about the Vayats* – the author presents historical data about the Vayats and the attempts to associate the Vayats to the Thracians or the Dobrudzians, as well as the migration processes from Thrace to Varna and from Dobrudzha to the south (which is already discussed in the previous chapter). The author also mentions similar ring-dances who share the same melody, but differ in the way they are danced – for example,

the Vayats dance *Avrenska Tropanka* and *Dobrudzhanska Raka*. In the same chapter are also compared the Vayats *Tropankata* and the Gagauz *Patak avasu* – “two absolutely identical dances with different names” (p. 83). The chapter also discusses the costumes of the individual ethnographic formations; for agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts. It seems to me that, in his desire to preserve all the collected information, the doctoral candidate giving too much details that have little to do with the influence of the Vayats on the dance folklore in Varna region. Still, there are interesting comparisons of the celebrations of St. George’s Day and Silivria – a day on which special respect is paid to the cattle, also known as Karamanovden (p. 65), but this also the day when the Christmas carolers from the Lower and the Upper mahala compete to determine who is stronger and who will “navali” (win) - page 84. Unfortunately, this chapter is quite “mixed” as it also talks about the geopolitical situation, migration, livelihood, ethnic groups in Varna, influences, dances, costumes, character of individual groups. In all this, there are also interesting thoughts on the specifics of dance, but they are lost in the general “too-much-ness”.

The second chapter (fourth according to the author) – ***Description and analysis of the customary ritual system of the Vayats*** is of essential importance. Here the candidate dwells on the family and calendar holidays and customs, but often comments that “*Vayats are no exception*” to the general picture. It would probably have been better to look for the exceptions. For example - “*Petyovden (Candlemas) is a especially honored by the Vayats – this is perhaps the most cherished and zealously guarded custom in the villages of Golitsa and Chenge (Asparuhovo). The customs and the ritual practices resemble the holiday cycle of Babinden (Midwife’s day) with the difference that the only male children are honored on this day, the participation of men in the celebrations is mandatory*”. (p. 127). Or – “*The Vayats are the only group in which the two festive cycles, although the male and female rites are distinguished, at one point intertwine, and only here among them we observe the participation of girls in the Christmas caroling and boys in Lazaruvane (maidens feast on Lazarus Saturday). The Lazarus girls choose their best men among eligible bachelors to lead the maiden ring-dance*”. (p. 127).

In the next chapter (fifth according to the author), ***Influence of the Vayats in the shaping of the Varna dance style***, start the essential considerations concerning the specifics of the dance performances. This is where the knowledge of the candidate really shows. The author compares similar dances but from different regions - “*Kutsa*” - “*Kutsata*” (in Varna and “*Pandelazh*” (*pandalash*) in Dobrudzha; “*Lyava*”, “*Lyavata*” which is played in Varna and “*Three times*” from Thrace. Similar comparisons are particularly interesting in the sub-chapters *Formation of Varna dance folklore* and *Stage transformation of Varna dance folklore* (pp. 135-142), where the author comments on productions by choreographers Margarita Dikova (“*Erkech dances*”, “*Ludi Mladi*”), Petar Angelov (“*Dances from Golitsa*”, “*Bride's Wreath*”, “*Kamchiya dance*”, “*Na megdana*”), Belcho Stanev (“*Silivrii*”, “*Medenik*”) and others, influenced by the dances of the Vayats. Unfortunately, the analyses are quite ascetic. Some of the texts give the impression that they were written for reports and

subsequently attached to the dissertation, because there are quite a few repetitions of entire paragraphs. The personal choreographic experience of the doctoral student in the stage presentation of the Vayats dances is also included.

The **Conclusion** presents more questions to consider than generalizations, and I quote - "*Here immediately comes the question: OK, they are not part of Thrace, they are not part of Dobrudzha, we claim that they are not part of the Varna dance tradition, in this case to which ethnographic area does the Vayats ethnic group belong?*" (p. 145). The answer is - "*Science must intervene here, which will hardly give an unequivocal answer... This is also the main challenge for future researchers of this issue - to look for the differences in the style and character of the dance folklore from Dobrudzha and Varna.*" (p. 145). It seems to me that the doctoral candidate must offer his own position, and not just to set tasks for future researchers.

I would not recommend the text to be published, unless very serious editing is done first to shape the text in such a way as to separate into different chapters the dance, the clothing and the livelihood, because now they are often mixed up, which prevents the author from bringing out his important ideas. It is a fact that the narration often starts off with choreographers and their biographies, then goes to ritual breads and "silent water"; starts discussion of the specifics of dance, and then returns to clothing - and so on in every chapter, which creates a feeling of repetition and chaos.

Towards the end, however, some generalizations are reached, such as – "*The Gagauz, the Thracians and the Vayats are the three ethnographic groups that greatly influenced the shaping of the style and character of the dance folklore from Varna*". (p. 155) and more - "*In conclusion, we can summarize that the dance lexicon, style and character from Varna that we know today, is mainly represented in two dance trends, Bozveli and Vetrin, with the bearer of the first one being grandfather Goshko, and the second one G. Velev*" (p. 161). The only thing that can be added here is the final firm statement of the author - I quote – "*The Vayats, the colonizers of northeastern Bulgaria, are the ones who give the style and character of the dance folklore of Varna region. This thesis is proven by the conducted field studies and by our contacts with the residents of the villages under study. The surveyed folklore tradition in over 40 villages from all over North-Eastern Bulgaria gives us reason to assert with moderate certainty about the influence of the Vayats in shaping the style and character of the dance folklore of the Varna region*" (p. 165).

In the **Conclusion**, the candidate also presents quite interesting statements - "According to the educational programs and plans for the students in the specialty Bulgarian Traditional Dance, in the art schools and the vocational high schools with specialty of Professional Dancer (in Bulgarian folk dances) for the 11th grade, the Erkech dances - choreography Margarita Dikova, is studied as part of the Thracian folklore area. According to the same program, in the second term Dances from Golitsa - choreography by Prof Petar Angelov, is taught as part of Dobrudzha. An absolute paradox, an unacceptable mistake and oversight. The same ethnographic material to be presented as two radically different ethnographic units, such as Dobrudzha and Thrace. This error is most likely caused by the

administrative division of the country, thus the village of Erkech falls into Burgas district, respectively Thrace, Golitsa into Varna district, respectively Dobrudzha" (p. 168). This calls into question established regional divisions and already accepted ethnographic areas. The author emphasizes repeatedly that "*Varna dance folklore is not Northern*"; that "*the folklore dance tradition from Varna and the region has no marks, stylistic and characteristic points of contact with the northern dance folklore*", and also that "*the Varna folklore differs, both in terms of style and in the nature of performance... from the Dobrudzha dance tradition*" (p. 169).

The abstract corresponds in meaning and content to what is written in the dissertation. The bibliography lists 102 sources in Cyrillic.

Three articles have been published on the subject of the dissertation:

- *Historical information about the Vayats, their lifestyle and culture.* – In: Yearbook of AMDFA, 2018, pp. 335-344.
- *Celebration of Petlyovden by the Vayats* - In: Spring scientific readings, AMTII, 2017, pp. 202-207.
- *Silivria (Rinachovden), when the adolescent becomes a man* - In: Yearbook of Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar" - Varna, No. 13, 2020, unknown pages.

However, I have objections regarding the contribution listed under No. 3 - I quote - "*This is the first attempt to present to the general public the contribution of the Varna choreographers in the search, preservation and promotion of Varna dance folklore as an independent ethnographic unit*". I believe that even before the appearance of Svilen Hristov, the "general public" was quite aware of the Varna dance folklore, and the proud emphasis on the words "the first attempt" only diminishes the value and calls into question the work of the doctoral candidate. The author himself writes that "*the Vayaks have been the subject of many scientific studies by linguists, folklorists, local historians, anthropologists and many other specialists*" (p. 6). I would also like to remind about the researches of Assoc. Prof Dimo Enev, Assoc. Prof Maria Kardzhieva, Assoc. Prof Stefan Yordanov, etc. The candidate discusses in great detail the publications on the subject (pp. 11-25) and then he suddenly "boasts" that his dissertation analyzes the Vayats "*for the first time*". I think one should be more moderate in their attempt to emphasize their own achievements.

If I need to mention the contributions of the dissertation, they will be related to the dancing style of the Vayats; to the attempts to "*introduce and examine various ring-dances and routines from the Varna region; description, analysis, comparison with dances and games from Dobrudzha and Sarta (Shumen and the Provadiy Plateau*" (p. 8). However, apparently the author did not think this to be a significant contribution, and missed it.

In my opinion, the candidate's achievements are in the detailed study of the Vayats ethnic group - their way of life and most importantly - their dancing, which distinguishes them from close ethnic groups such as the Sart, Gagauz, Erli, Erkech, Chengen, etc. I quote - "*The Gagauz dance has an elevated*

spirit and character, while in the performance of the Vayats we observe roughness, rigidity and primitiveness. We see this dancing in the villages with a predominantly Vayats population. The soft, sophisticated style with a lot of finesse and "makam" is found in the Gagauz villages and where immigrants from Thrace predominate. We can attribute this to the breadth and technique of dancing among the Thracians" (p. 16). And so also – "If Golichians and Erkechlians have more points of contact with each other, then Chengens are more aristocratic, more sophisticated. This is evident both in the costume and the dance" (p. 38). And more - "Although the Sarts have many things in common with the Vayats and more specifically with the Chengens, they themselves are defined and considered as a separate ethnic group. The term vayats offends them, they consider themselves to be people of long history, people of aristocratic ancestry and royal blood" (p. 38).

I believe that Svilen Hristov's dissertation is valuable for the preservation of knowledge about ethnic groups, which in our modern society could be blurred. The descriptions of the dances studied by the candidate are also of contributory nature (pp. 172-205).

Considering the above, I propose to the highly respected Scientific Jury to award Svilen Hristov the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional direction 8.3. – Music and Dance Art.

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