

# Kurban: Shifting Economy and the Transformations of a Ritual.

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► **To cite this version:**

Detelina Tocheva. Kurban: Shifting Economy and the Transformations of a Ritual.. Stephen Gudeman, Chris Hann. Economy and Ritual: Studies of Postsocialist Transformations., Berghahn Books., pp.107-136, 2015, 978-1-78238-569-1. <<http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/GudemanRitual>>. <halshs-01666723>

**HAL Id: halshs-01666723**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01666723>**

Submitted on 18 Dec 2017

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Detelina Tocheva. 2015b. "Kurban: shifting economy and the transformations of a ritual." In Stephen Gudeman and Chris Hann (eds.). *Economy and Ritual: Six Studies of Postsocialist Transformations*. New York: Berghahn Books : 107-136.

## ***Kurban***

### ***Shifting Economy and the Transformations of a Ritual***

**Detelina Tocheva**

The profound economic upheavals in the Bulgarian countryside after the fall of socialism were accompanied by significant transformations in ritual life. If in some respects ritual activity sharply declined as a result of the economic downturn (Creed 2002), in other respects rural areas became the cradle of ritual creativity (Creed 2011). Instead of following the economic depression, the ritual that I examine has been thriving in a period marked by social disjuncture and a crumbling economy. In the village of Belan in the southern Rhodope Mountains, a new type of spring *kurban* ritual, related to sheep breeding in the past and first established in its present form in 1992, grew in importance as making a living became harder. The term *kurban* is of Muslim Turkish origin and means "sacrifice." In this region it designates both a Muslim and an Orthodox ritual comprising a blood sacrifice and a sacrificial meal shared among the participants. The word spread in the Balkans during the Ottoman period, but it is not known when and under what circumstances it came to be applied to communal feasts with slaughtered animals at Orthodox churches.

The postsocialist village *kurban* in Belan is relatively disconnected from religion, which may be viewed as a legacy of socialist secularizing policies. Its egalitarian spirit, however, is clearly a postsocialist invention. Individualism, competition, and economic maximization of outputs and minimization of inputs have become prominent in many areas of village life. In contrast, this ritual transcends individual interests and deploys an egalitarian grammar. The stronger the economic fracturing since the early 1990s, the wider and more important the ritual of sharing, opposed to calculative reasoning and self-interest. I argue that the new *kurban* is the annual realization of a consensual model of egalitarian relationships; it promotes sharing and negates self-interest and differentiation according to wealth

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and power. The ritual encapsulates a model of an alternative economy and sociality that partakes in the making of social cohesion.

To concentrate on sheep in order to examine social, economic, and ritual life in a Balkan country in the twenty-first century may appear as an anachronistic reference back to the classical Mediterranean anthropology of an earlier era (Campbell 1964). I argue that this approach provides a privileged insight into both long-term transformation and the surprising creativity of the human economy in Bulgarian postsocialist capitalism. Looking back over the last century, I notice a reversal of the relationship between the prominence and role of *kurban*, and the economic role of sheep breeding in the local economy, a trend comparable to the trajectory of pig-sticking in Hungary analyzed by Vidacs (this volume). While in the past sheep

breeding was of crucial importance for almost every house (Light, this volume), now the number of sheep holders has shrunk in relation to the village population and their economic role is much smaller. Before socialist collectivization started in the late 1940s, the spring ritual of *kurban* in Belan involved only sheep-owning families. At present, it has reached major prominence as a village-wide event. Thus, the current *kurban* unites a village community whose economic resources are more diverse and stretch far beyond sheep breeding. In comparison with the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the early postsocialist period saw a reversal of the relationship between the economy of sheep breeding and the ritual. Whereas the shrinking economic importance of sheep followed the general rural decline in the country, the new communal *kurban*, fruit of villagers' creativity, has become extremely popular. This ritual is an instance of a stunningly wide phenomenon. Various forms of *kurban* have risen across the country as the economy became more fragmented and social stratification sharper after 1989. How are we to make sense of this? Anthropologists have argued for an approach to the economy that accounts for economic practices and ideas as rooted in broader ideological and social logics, for ways to understand economy as culture (Gudeman 1986). As Polanyi argued, while "the human economy ... is embedded and enmeshed in institutions, economic and noneconomic" (Polanyi 1957: 250), global policies tend to create markets that are increasingly disembedded from society. Keeping this tension in mind, the lived, human economy (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010) needs to be approached in its social and cultural embeddedness. Ritual can also provide a model of economic thought and operation; it can effectively make social cohesion. The postsocialist spring *kurban* in Belan is an enactment in ritual of alternative, noninstrumental economy and egalitarian social organization.

This is not the only village-wide event where villagers and guests get together. The villagers look forward to their summer fair (*sabor*), initiated

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in 1991, probably as much as to their *kurban*. At the fair, local political leaders, folkloric ensembles, and singers occupy the stage. Large quantities of food and drink are sold. The village fair belongs to the category of events that legitimate the existing social and economic order, and dominant ideologies of consumption and leisure. To paraphrase Godelier, such rituals are the visible expressions of mental superstructures underlying the social order (1984). But rituals can also express a reversal of the actual social order, contest it, or undermine it. Rituals can also express potentialities present in shared thought, although not necessarily formulated as such. For example, Gerald Creed's *Masquerade and Postsocialism* (2011) examines mumming festivals in rural Bulgaria as the ritual enactment of social relationships, different from those imposed on Bulgarian society after 1989. For Creed, mummies and their covillagers practice festivals of various scales and elaboration, thus compensating for the cultural dispossession through which they have been deprived of any meaningful participation in the politically and economically reformed society. Different sorts of *kurban* have been equally widespread since 1989 and subject to variation and adaptation (Givre 2006). If mumming is, among other things, a reflection on the integration of conflict and tension within community (Creed 2011; see also Creed 2006), the type of *kurban* that I analyze is a reflection on a noninstrumental

economy and egalitarian community. While in many respects competition, acquisitiveness, and stratification characterize village life, in Belan, this ritual, thriving since its creation in 1992, hints at the opposite of self-interest, competition, and differentiation. In contrast to Marxist approaches,

it does not legitimate or disguise the extant social order. It rather enacts diametrically opposed economic and organizational principles once per year and thereby generates social cohesion by effacing individual interests and actual stratification at the ritual moment.

After a brief depiction of the social structure of the local economy, I describe the ritual and how its messages contradict both the officially promoted principles of the economy and social hierarchy and the effects of the postsocialist reforms. After examining long-term transformations of livelihood in the region, I pay close attention to a reversal of the relation between the economic prominence of sheep breeding, to which the predecessor of the current ritual was related, and the affirmation of the postsocialist *kurban*.

### **The Social Structure of the Local Economy**

Generally, after 1989 the elite-organized dismantlement of entire sectors of the economy for selfish gain and the concomitant undermining of cru<sup>110</sup>

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cial state functions (Ganev 2007) have had painful effects throughout the Bulgarian countryside. In Belan, the state-run cooperative farm was the heart of economic life under socialism. It employed most locals. With its disbanding in 1992, the small industries closed down; the school, the kindergarten and local administration have continually downsized their personnel since that moment. The few local entrepreneurial ventures in the 1990s did not compensate for the loss of jobs and villagers did not become agricultural entrepreneurs. Agriculture has become only an occasional source of cash. Increasingly, out-migration affected Belan. The earlier principles that structured the local social hierarchy, such as proximity to the regional Party leadership, or membership in the managerial apparatus, were redefined according to the new economic principles, with political connections remaining important for entrepreneurs. In practice, some of the formerly powerful figures have retained some power. Success in rural tourism has propelled a small local economic elite.

In 2010 Belan had 151 inhabited houses containing 182 households.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the Rhodope villages have a mixed economy. In contrast with the presocialist past, now no one sees a high number of sheep as a sign of wealth. In Belan, the most significant income comes from salaries, wages, pensions, five small grocery stores, and house-based tourism for some families. The main employers are the mayor's office, the school, the kindergarten, a shirt-making factory and a small wood-processing plant. An overwhelming majority of households are unable to cope only with their monetary income from wages and salaries. They grow potatoes, beans, and vegetables and keep a few sheep; some have a cow and a calf. Home-grown food is seen as an insufficient fallback.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the majority of sheepowning houses use them as one branch of their complex domestic economy and many do so through participation in common pasturing.

For a few houses sheep, among other assets, constitute a connection to the market of rural tourism. Since the late 1990s, the expansion of rural

tourism has partially alleviated the bitter sense of political and economic abandonment. In Belan and in nearby Radino, house-based tourism has brought additional income and more life in the summer, permitting the villagers to retrieve a sense of self-esteem. This enterprise largely depends on domestic farming, nonwage labor, and local networks of cooperation. It is a form of engagement with the market through the assets held by the domestic economy. Home-grown potatoes, beans, vegetables, cow milk, veal, lamb, and dairy products from sheep milk are highly valued. Two families who take in tourists, one in Belan and one in Radino, have clearly outdistanced all the others; both keep sheep. Therefore, rural tourism has been the major source of social stratification over the last ten years, with the domestic economy as its key supplier and marketing argument.

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In 2010, a wealthy house in the village is one that successfully combines various incomes from salaries, wages, old-age pensions, and small businesses with the sale of agricultural produce (potatoes, beans, milk, meat) and produces all these along with other foods to be eaten by the household members. As in socialist times, food produced in the countryside feeds relatives in the town. This food fulfills the important task of supplying urban residents who chronically experience money shortages and are faced with generalized employment instability. The situation has the twofold effect of putting stronger pressure on rural domestic food production while simultaneously encouraging migration to the largest cities that offer more attractive salaries. The pressure on the rural house relaxes when former small-town residents move on to cities, or migrate abroad. They tend then to come back less often to the village house, inhabited usually by the elderly. Relatively well-off houses comprise three or four generations, with steady income from salaries and pensions.

In a worse-off house, money income is irregular, coming most often from precarious wages and short-term unemployment benefits. Usually these households do not produce enough to sustain themselves. Thus, when the incomes are limited and irregular, pensioners become precious house members, as their income is guaranteed. Most often pensions are used to pay the monthly bills for the whole house. Elderly couples or solitaries, if they receive a relatively solid pension, can afford not to keep animals or to grow any foods. Intergenerational solidarity intermingles with rural-urban solidarities, as old-age pensions and domestic farming often support younger urbanites or commuting household members. These solidarities alleviate the pressure stemming from the low salaries, delayed payments, and job insecurity that those who move to the city accept as an alternative to complete unemployment in the village.

#### **Together, Sharing, and Equity**

The annual village *kurban* in Belan enacts an economic model of gift and sharing, and an egalitarian social organization from which hierarchies and competition are completely absent. As noted above, the Balkan *kurban* is a ritual adopted during the Ottoman period that became characteristic of the Christian and Muslim traditions (Givre 2006; Hristov and Sikimić 2007). Different sorts of *kurban* provided an enduring frame for the continuation of religious practices under socialism, although they were not necessarily understood as religious by the participants (see Blagoev 2004; Hristov and Manova 2007; Iankov 2006; Kolev 2006; about the Rhodope region see Iordanova

2006; Stamenova 1995: 137-186). *Kurban* is practiced at Muslim

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religious celebrations, Orthodox saints' days, village days, and at life-cycle rituals, and to commemorate personal events (e.g., a sacrificial *kurban* meal may be offered annually on the date when a person miraculously survived a car accident). "To slaughter *kurban*" (*koli se kurban*) means that an animal is slaughtered, cooked, and shared as a free meal with kin, friends, acquaintances, and other people. The animal is not necessarily a sheep or a lamb. It can also be a calf, though in the Rhodopes it is commonly a sheep. The blood sacrifice constitutes the symbolic religious matrix of this ritual for Muslims and Christians (Givre 2006).

In Belan, there is a large Bulgarian Muslim majority and a Bulgarian Christian minority. The two groups practice some forms of *kurban* separately, and participate together in others. First, the annual Muslim Kurban Bairam celebration is marked by the domestic slaughter of one sheep per married pair, so up to three or four animals per house in Belan. A small portion of the meat is given to neighbors and to the village poor, usually elderly living alone on a tiny pension; the rest is cooked, canned, or frozen. The distribution is not ritualized. Second, ritual gatherings in the Muslim houses are organized for life-cycle events, such as childbirth, wedding, or commemoration of deceased relatives. Then, a house opens up and invites fellow villagers, work colleagues, friends, and kin, irrespective of their religious identity. Third, the village spring *kurban* transcends the houses; the village acts as a community that hosts itself and its guests. The village *kurban* has much in common with the symbolism of sharing and equality of the Muslim house-based *kurban*: the foods are almost identical, the guests use only spoons (as in everyday life in the past), and three or four people eat from the same plate, all being received with no differentiation of status, wealth, gender, or age. Fourth, the two Orthodox churches in Belan also hold *kurban* on the day of their respective patron saints, but these attract less people than the village *kurban*. There is no equivalent ritual practiced at the local mosque. While Kurban Bairam and the *kurban* of the churches were officially forbidden under socialism as religious practice, villagers report that the solidarity between Muslims and Christians allowed keeping their respective ritual hidden from the authorities, and thus permitted them to continue, though on a limited scale. Whereas the celebrations in the Muslim houses are marked with long-term continuity, as they seem to have changed little under socialism and after, even though more guests were hosted with the rising living standard in the 1970s and 1980s, the village *kurban* is a postsocialist invention inspired by an earlier spring *kurban* related to sheep breeding.

All neighboring villages offer their own *kurban* in the spring; the villages coordinate with each other in order to avoid overlapping dates. *Kurban* in Belan is said to be the one in the area attended by the most numerous

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guests. The total number of participants was estimated as 1,000 in 2010. In fact, neighboring Radino claimed this number for their *kurban* in 2009. If very accurate figures are hard to establish, claiming higher numbers attests to the fact that *kurban* fosters competition over prestige between the villages.

The village *kurban* in Belan was initiated in 1992 by several villagers,

most of them Muslim. Ethnographic records of the Rhodopes show that before World War II Muslims offered a spring *kurban* on the day of the first milk measuring; no data evidence such practice among the Christians. However, as pointed out above, Christians as much as Muslims in the Balkans consider *kurban* as their traditional ritual. In Belan, the Muslim religious elements are easier to identify, but both Christians and Muslims see the spring *kurban* as a request for protection and prosperity that bridges the two religions. Most villagers spoke of the event in remotely religious terms, or drew no religious association at all: “This is good for the sheep, for the people, for the village.” Many of those who left the village or originate from neighboring villages emphasized the pleasure of visiting Belan and getting together with their relatives, friends, as well as former and current colleagues.

Some put a stronger emphasis on religion, without claiming an exclusive Christian or Muslim origin. A wife and a husband, both of them retired villagers of Muslim origin, have cooked for *kurban* and coordinated the preparation of food since 1992. They were among the initiators. The woman, a former agricultural worker at the cooperative and later a cleaning woman at the school, born in 1945, told me: “This is already a tradition. We got used to it.” When I inquired about the reason of having created this tradition, she said: “The old people understood it like this, that when you make *kurban*, the Lord (*Gospod*) simply protects you against everything, the plants against hail, against everything.” Then she cited a Christian woman who had passed away a couple of years earlier: “There was this woman who lived up there, the wife of the hunter, you know, she passed away, may God forgive her. She used to say: ‘Our village is prosperous, because we make our *kurban*. We make our *kurban* and the Lord takes care of us,’ she used to say.” Despite invocations of the elderly, the village *kurban* is not referred to in terms of heritage or traditional cultural value, nor are there struggles over authenticity. Its most usual meaning is a sacrificial get-together that brings prosperity (*bereket* is a term of Turkish origin broadly used in colloquial Bulgarian). Muslims may speak of protection from “Allah” and the “Lord”; Christians would refer to the “Lord” and “God.” A common practice of Muslims and Christians is to refer to “the one who is above” or to “the one up there.” No one asserts *kurban* to be either Muslim or Christian. However, on the Friday morning before *kurban* in May 2010, about twenty

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elderly men gathered in the mosque for a prayer, without publicizing the event. As usual, there was no gathering in the church before or after *kurban*. This different involvement of the two religions shows that a Muslim connotation is more noticeable. But no official Muslim authority takes part and the ritual is not the subject of claims over correct religious practice (see Ghodsee 2010).

This bridging of the two religions is common in Bulgaria. What attracts attention is that at the key moment of the ritual meal neither religion is given prominence. On the contrary, in the preliminary phase Islam is noticeable but not publicized. This serves to soften the religious connotation, which is important in a region where the presocialist and socialist governments repressed Islam. Harsh policies obliged people to change Muslim names to Christian and punished Islamic practices more visibly than equivalent Christian practices (Gruev 2008). Thus, *kurban* is a statement of unity

and community in relation to this violent past and state-promoted divisions. Muslim Bulgarians remained a majority in Belan despite out-migration to Turkey after 1912, when this region became part of independent Bulgaria. At this time, Bulgarian Christians represented around one-fifth of the population of the village (Uzunov 1993: 33). Shortly after the establishment of socialism, both Muslims and Christians left the village to work in industrial plants, in mines, on construction sites, in the administration, and in education. In 2010 the majority was by far Muslim. In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries Muslims tended to live from agriculture and raise animals, producing to sustain themselves, while Christians were craftspeople, shepherds, or masons and had more access to the monetized economy (Brunnbauer 2002: 331-333). Today, however, there are no substantial differences in the domestic economy according to religious affiliation. An elderly Christian man, in fact a committed communist and former mayor, has several sheep, while some Muslims of his generation do not have animals, even though they used to work with animals in the collective farm.

Independently of age, of religious background, of whether or not they own sheep, villagers and their guests readily take part in the village *kurban*. In Belan, this ritual takes place through gifts of money and milk, voluntary work, sharing of food, and the staging of equality. One area of communal sharing is defined by the donations from the villagers. Three employees of the mayor's office collect monetary donations, each of them covering the houses of one area. They bring the collected funds to a bookkeeper who writes the figures in a notebook. In May 2010, 900 leva (450 Euro) were collected, in addition to 800 leva (400 Euro) left from previous years. The bookkeeper, like all villagers, emphasized that no one is expected to give a certain amount, and that people gave from a few cents to 20 leva (10 Euro),

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and exceptionally there were donations of 100 leva (50 Euro). I inquired if there were higher expectations of businesspeople for example, but no such expectations were explicitly mentioned or evident from the conversations that I heard. In 2010, the village bakery donated bread. As usual, sheep milk was donated from the village flock and from the flock of the large farm. Five sheep, 50 kilos of wheat, and 25 kilos of beans were bought and paid for with the collected money.

Another area of sharing is work for the event; the time and effort are not calculated and there is no return of any kind. Since 1992, every year in the beginning of May the mayor has organized a meeting to decide about practicalities. Ivan, a 73-year-old former professional soldier has been the bookkeeper of the village *kurban* since 2005. Emin, a diligent 80-year-old man, the milker of the village flock, chooses the sheep to be bought and slaughtered for the event. A couple of pensioners cook the meal. Most of the villagers who took over the organizational work in 2010 are of Muslim origin; the bookkeeper and one of the usual helpers, a jobless villager in his late thirties, are Christians. Emin had thirty years' experience as a shepherd at the state-run farm and was known for his expertise with sheep. Ivan does not keep animals; he and his wife say they enjoy freedom and quiet life. The cook said that Ivan, being a friendly person with good education, was the most suitable to act as a bookkeeper: "We invited him [since 2005], he is the most important person in charge [with the organization of *kurban*]." In



addition, at least twenty other people share many other tasks.

The village *kurban* takes place on a Saturday. From Thursday on, intense preparation begins. On Thursday, 27 May 2010, in the morning, seven women in their fifties and sixties, all of Muslim origin, gathered in the yard of a centrally located restaurant and cleaned the beans and wheat from little stones and tiny twigs. At the same time, a group of men went to five different houses where there were villagers willing to sell their sheep for *kurban*. Emin selected the animals that two villagers helped transport, one with his truck and the other one with his horse cart, to the meadow situated just behind the school and the mayor's office, where they were slaughtered. Before slaughtering, Ivan the bookkeeper supervised the weighing of the animals and noted the weight and the corresponding amount to be paid to the sheep owners. An elderly man read Muslim prayers just before each sheep was slaughtered; he is the one who usually utters the prayers when the Muslim houses slaughter sheep for the feast of *Kurban Bairam*.<sup>4</sup> Four men helped the butcher skin the animals and clean the giblets. The cleaned animals were taken 20 meters away, to the cold room in the basement of the house of culture (*chitalishte*), which had been equipped as part of an underground bomb shelter in socialist times. The meat stayed there until Friday afternoon when the cooks and other helpers took over.

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After the animals were brought to the cold room, the men, supervised by the mayor, erected a temporary shelter from rainproof cloth supported by wooden and metallic girders right behind the house of culture, a few meters away from the mayor's office. The shelter was ready on Friday afternoon. Tables were set up for the meat processing and cauldrons were installed. The cooks, milker, and the bookkeeper took charge of the meat processing. The animals were cut in smaller pieces by joints, according to the Muslim tradition. Six persons stayed there during the entire night.

A third domain of sharing is the gift of milk used to make yogurt for the ritual meal. The village herd and a large-scale farmer offered around 250 liters of sheep milk altogether. Women usually make the yogurt. This is a great responsibility, because the quantity to process is considerable (between 25 and 35 liters per woman) and because the yogurt is offered to all villagers and guests, and with the other foods represents the village during the ritual. On the two days before *kurban*, the sheep milk was brought to eight women in a row. The organizational committee knew without deliberating who should make the yogurt. These were neither very young nor elderly women who were used to the procedure; my hostess was one of them.

She received approximately 30 liters of milk in jerry cans. The procedure took her a couple of hours. If one misses the right moment to remove the boiling thick and fat sheep milk from the stove, the yogurt made out of it gets a flavor of burned milk. We knew the result only by the next morning, when the milk had turned into yogurt, on the day of *kurban*. The taste was fine. But if there is any shortcoming in the preparation and the yogurt does not match the standards, there is no way to make it again because of the lack of time and milk, which means that the women who process the milk are not allowed to fail. Sheep yogurt, in addition to *keshkek*, the ritual dish of wheat and mutton, is the traditional food that all locals and guests eat on *kurban*. On the day of *kurban*, some of the cooks and helpers acknowledged having detected a flavor of burned milk in one of the eight pots of

yogurt, but none of them tried to know who had made it.

The current *kurban* stages equality. Starting at 11 a.m., a long trickle of local and external guests started arriving to a former cafe situated on the ground floor of the house of culture where the tables were set up, inside and outside. The cafe was open only for the event. The wife of the mayor actively participated in serving the tables as she knew this place as one that she had rented formerly. Other helpers were a young jobless villager, two women working for the mayor's office, two other women, and myself. The guests arrived in small groups of relatives, neighbors, and friends. They were all served in the same way, regardless of their social differences: per four guests, there was one large bowl of bean soup, another one of *keshkek*, and one bowl of sheep yogurt. People from nearby villages and the

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city came, as well as villagers who had moved out a long time ago. A man who belongs to the family running the most successful tourist guesthouse brought a bunch of tourists, young Bulgarians from a distant region. They ate like all the others.

The mayor was accompanied by a politician from the regional council who seemed to be well acquainted with the ritual. The mayor and his guest kept a low profile. Unlike other festive gatherings such as the village fair, during which politicians make speeches, *kurban* is not used as a political arena. People spend time outside before or after the meal, chatting with those whom they have not seen for a long time. But there are no announcements, ceremonial thanks, microphones, or music. The ritual brings the people together in a festive mood, but somewhat quiet and solemn. In contrast, the village fair, taking place later in the summer, involves speeches by politicians, performances of local and guest folkloric groups, loud music, and dances. Sellers of sweets and other foods, toys, and different commodities occupy the square and the central street. The local shop owners set up large barbecues for the sale of food and drinks. They compete with each other and with the incomers for the best place, and conflicts frequently arise.

In contrast, the calm atmosphere of the village *kurban* expresses its sacred character. The event is the ritual expression of consensus and egalitarian values; no one's role or status is on display. At the moment of the meal, actual stratification in the village and differentiation between the villagers and wealthier guests, as tourists often happen to be, are downplayed. The symbolism of shared food, the absence of individual plates, and the equal treatment of all guests stress *sameness*. This applies also to the Gypsies who come from the largest of the local villages and who are sometimes discriminated against in everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

Everyone is given food, under the condition that this food is eaten within the company of the others, in the same way. The cooks and the helpers in the improvised kitchen under the shelter criticized demands of persons who asked for food to be poured in small packages for their relatives who could not come. The cooks argued that the food had to be consumed on the place of *kurban*, with the other guests, and not at home, and then, between them, commented that some people wanted to take home as much food as possible. Such criticism was expressed twice, though the commentary did not entail an actual refusal to give food. A few other demands were immediately satisfied, as the cooks knew that some ill persons could not come

to the village square. As a general rule, food is to be eaten with the others, according to the specific egalitarian grammar deployed on this occasion. The preliminary phase of preparation also reveals preoccupation with equity. The decision about whose animals to buy for the ritual was infused

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with a deep concern about equity. Emin, who selects the animals, knew who among the villagers had an animal to sell. He knew for example that a neighboring house of his own had a ram; the couple who raised it was planning to sell it as a sacrificial animal for *kurban*. The husband had been unemployed for years and the wife was making little money from the small grocery shop she had. Their two sons had left the country a few months earlier and were employed as factory workers in the Czech Republic. For this family *kurban* was a good occasion to make some money. The week before *kurban*, Emin told me that he had already decided not to take the ram of his neighbors, selecting instead the animal of another woman. “This woman went to the mayor, crying, saying she needed money desperately, she wanted me to take her sheep. She has three sheep that she wants to sell. So I’m not taking my neighbors’ ram, I have to take hers.”

Emin changed his mind during his final visit to the houses willing to sell animals. Realizing that it was not possible to make a decision that would significantly favor one person and disadvantage another, he chose one animal per house among the five “candidate” houses. The ram of the neighbors was purchased, too, but as it was too heavy—75 kilos, that is, twenty kilos above the heaviest of all the other animals—Emin and Ivan the bookkeeper negotiated with the couple. The couple agreed to “step back” with 10 kilos and accept payment only for the remaining 65 kilos. The tariff for all was 4 leva per kilo. During that spring, the price for lamb in usual transactions, not the ones related to *kurban*, varied between 8 and 12 leva per kilo. It was convenient for the sheep owners, who needed money, to sell their animals at a moment when external demand is usually low; even in the late spring and during the summer when this demand reaches a peak it concerns lamb rather than mutton. For *kurban*, the price was set up by the organizers and no bargaining was possible. In this phase of *kurban*, equity was not staged; it was effectively, pragmatically implemented.

**Reversal of the Relationship Between Sheep Breeding and *Kurban***

The integrative character of the village *kurban* is a postsocialist novelty, but the ritual builds on an older tradition. If in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the ritual was practiced only by groups of sheep-owning families, the event created in 1992 integrates a larger range of participants. Since the wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the importance of sheep breeding has significantly diminished, and did not reattain its earlier level after the fall of socialism. Conversely, the spring *kurban* has become one of the most integrative and popular rituals since 1992. There has been a reversal of the relationship between the sheep economy and the ritual.

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Sheep breeding, trade in sheep meat, milk, milk products, wool, skins, and different handicrafts related to wool and skin processing were major resources in the Rhodopes for hundreds of years (Brunnbauer 2003: 189-197; Primovski 1973: 283-287). The number of sheep was the indicator of wealth, in particular for Muslims who sustained themselves more directly from animal breeding and agriculture than Christians, whose men were

more often craftsmen and masons. In the nineteenth century the needs of the Ottoman army propelled demand for wool, creating a new source of income for sheep breeders, wool processors, and weavers (Brunnbauer 2002: 331 passim; 2003: 190-191). Belan and Radino are situated in the region that was the last bastion of the Ottoman Empire in Bulgaria; Ottoman rule endured until 1912. After World War I, Bulgaria lost territory to Greece. Sheep herding and its related commerce declined due to the disappearance of the Ottoman markets and because large warmer grazing lands in the winter became more difficult to reach. During the winter the animals had to be kept in stables and feeding them became a serious problem. In the area of Belan, located almost on the border of present-day Greece, the negative effects were limited because the villagers were still able to cross the border and use land on the other side for farming and hay harvesting.<sup>6</sup> Until World War II, the region was known as backward and poor. Before the establishment of the communist regime in 1944, cows were kept for milk and as draft animals, while “the goat was a small cow for the poor inhabitant of the Rhodope” (Damianov 1972: 56). Although the average size of sheep herds declined after the loss of access to the Aegean Sea, sheep remained the most important animals. The successive wars between 1912 and 1944 (two world wars and two Balkan wars) impoverished even the owners of larger herds and the wealthier craftspeople. Requisitions of food imposed during the wars endangered survival (Damianov 1972). The state maintained an army while food was extremely scarce. Elderly villagers told me how, when they were children before 1944, their parents were always looking for inventive ways of hiding animals and corn from officials who would confiscate them no matter how poor the villagers were. In this context of scarcity, sheep were a crucial source for self-provisioning with food and cash. But the successive wars and the political upheavals that led to the establishment of new borders decisively undermined large-scale sheep breeding (Uzunov 1993: 51-52; Brunnbauer 2002: 332).

Rich evidence attests to the prominence of sheep breeding, milking, and *kurban* up to the first years of socialism.<sup>7</sup> Written data describing the measuring of milk in villages near Belan go back to the end of the nineteenth century (Shishkov 1965: 265-266).<sup>8</sup> The first milking and measuring, called *perdoi* (or *predui*, from the verb *doia*—to milk) took place on the summer dairy farm (*mandra*). The measuring helped determine each one's share

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from the milk of the flock. The milk from the ewes of every sheep owner was measured in wooden receptacles (Primovski 1969: 177). Usually illiterate shepherds made signs on a stick of wood in order to record the quantities and names, a system of notation abandoned with increasing literacy.

An elderly villager told me that he remembered shepherds using the old notation system but he did not know how precisely it worked.

Ethnographic records based on interviews conducted in 1984 among elderly people in a nearby village mention that, at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, rich men such as local *pasha* or *bei* offered *kurban* in the vicinity of their summer dairy farm on the occasion of the first milking of their flocks; the flock of one such person could be as large as 1,000 ewes. In the same neighboring village, “collective dairy farms” (*saborni mandri*), the most common form, gathered around 400 to 500 ewes.<sup>9</sup> The first milk measuring was celebrated with *kurban* on the

meadows surrounding the summer dairy farm.<sup>10</sup> The sheep-owning families and their relatives together ate dishes prepared with lamb and milk. The milk for making yogurt for *kurban* was provided by the flock and the sacrificial sheep were donated by sheep owners or bought collectively for the occasion. The animals were slaughtered in the milking pen or in a clean place on the territory of the dairy farm. A dish made of mutton and wheat (*keshkek*), but also specialties with beans and milk, was prepared by specialized cooks.<sup>11</sup>

In Belan, the first milk measuring, immediately followed by *kurban* on the same day, usually took place in the beginning of June, when the lambs were weaned. Before the completion of collectivization in the 1950s, Belan, like all villages in the region, had several sheep flocks, each formed by the participation of several families, except for those who possessed large flocks of their own. The author of a village monograph reports that, between the middle of the nineteenth century and the 1920s, in Belan and Radino, some people possessed flocks as large as 200 to 800 sheep. During the spring and the summer, the ewes grazed on summer pastures and were kept outside the village, in sheepfolds equipped as dairy farms. According to this monograph, in 1935 in the area of the village (including remote neighborhoods and very small villages) there were six summer dairy farms with a total of 1,045 ewes and 97 goats (Uzunov 1993: 52). Cheese and other milk products were made on each dairy farm.

A Christian villager born in 1918 told me that he had helped in dairy farms since he was fourteen, that is, around 1932. According to him, then Belan had three flocks of 150 to 180 ewes each. Until socialism, his family—he had three siblings—kept around 50 sheep, 10 goats and a cow. But he did not recall having seen *kurban* on the dairy farm. He remembered that the first measuring of the milk every spring was celebrated simply by drink

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ing fresh milk. Another villager, a Muslim born in 1924, said that there was “*kurban* for the sheep” organized on a dairy farm near Belan on the initiative of the Muslim villagers in 1936, 1937, and 1938. There was one sacrificial animal per 40 ewes and about 200 ewes on the summer dairy farm where his family sent theirs. According to him, *kurban* did not attract external guests and had a more pronounced Muslim connotation: “those who knew prayers sang them.” He added that with the outbreak of World War II in 1941, the state imposed rationed food provisioning and the restrictions caused the interruption of *kurban*. He recalled that *kurban* was organized again in Belan in May 1945 or 1946, after the communists had taken over the government. The local inhabitants presented it as a celebration of the name day of the communist leader Georgi Dimitrov (Saint George is celebrated on 6 May). He also mentioned that much later, in 1957 or 1958, when collectivization was completed, several villages jointly organized a big *kurban*, but it was already called “village fair” (*selski sabor*) and not *kurban*. The village spring *kurban* created in 1992 inherited features of the presocialist ritual, but it is unprecedented as an integrative village-wide event.

While the economic role of sheep was diminishing, the village *kurban* has grown in popularity. A man, born in 1938, formerly a cowherd at the state-run farm and later a driver, explained that before collectivization

there were different *kurban*, but its current form as a village-wide event was the most elaborate and made him feel particularly proud. He also related the newly established tradition to the formation of a village sheep flock: "In addition, we have already our flock of 150 to 200 sheep. We have put them together, they are private, ours, and we have given them to a shepherd to shepherd them."

By its attendance, popularity, and broadly shared symbolism, *kurban* has proven to be more integrative than the participation in common village pasturing. While, in May 2010, only 43 houses, out of 151 inhabited houses in the village, had ewes in the flock and only they were involved in milk measuring and taking of shares, *kurban* was a village event that attracted around 1,000 participants according to local estimations. The diminished material centrality of sheep has resulted in the creation of one village flock. At the same time, *kurban* became the annual symbolic communal affirmation. The ritual gatherings of sheep-owning households on their summer dairies, widespread less than a century earlier, were not revived. Village *kurban* has become a ritual enactment of unity throughout a period of economic decline and out-migration.

Looking back over the entire century, we can see that the relationship between the economic and symbolic role of sheep at the village level experienced a reversal shortly after the end of socialism. In the presocialist

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past, those who celebrated *kurban* together in the spring had their sheep pastured and milked together. There is less economic value in sheep now in comparison with before socialism. Economic interest in sheep keeping unites those who participate in the village flock as private shareholders. The spring *kurban* follows the opposite logic; it has been transformed into the most prominent symbolic affirmation of the village community. In contrast with the presocialist practice, the present-day *kurban*, while directly dependent on the village flock for collecting milk for the ritual meal, is not limited to those with animals in the flock. None of the families having their ewes in this flock and thus donating milk claims public acknowledgement of this contribution. Even a large-scale farmer who donates as much milk as the village flock is not granted specific recognition in the frame of the ritual. The symbolism of *kurban* stresses certain community relationships and downplays others. Not only does *Kurban* stretch to encompass all villagers, irrespective of keeping animals, but through the ritual this diversified community downplays self-interest, competition, and stratification, and stages equality.

How does this ritual articulate with the economic decline and individualized struggle to make a living? In the following section I outline the major economic transformations under socialism and after its collapse, paying special attention to sheep breeding as this has shifted from being a central component of livelihood to just one economic resource among others in a complex house and market economy.

### **Sheep in a Complex Commercial and Domestic Economy, Socialist and Postsocialist**

Upheavals and ruptures have characterized economic life in Belan, with different political regimes having required villagers to implement different principles of economic and social organization, often with unpredictable effects. The transformations of the economy can be traced by looking at

the place of sheep in it. One of the most radical reforms undertaken by the young socialist state was the collectivization of land and animals. The Rhodopes had relatively low productivity in agriculture until socialist collectivization

and industrialization. Collectivization was initiated in 1947

and was completed in 1958, with its last phase having become known as

“*massovization*” (Gruev 2009; Migev 1998). In my fieldwork area the process started in 1950 and ended in 1957. The socialist plan imposed collective breeding of cattle and sheep and introduced a larger variety of crops on the collective farm’s lands. My informants remembered best the last two decades of socialism; they recalled economic ease and a lively village

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sphere. They emphasized the availability of jobs on the collective farm, in transport, manufacturing, small industries, and administrative and educational institutions. They pointed out that the state farm had a large number of animals, that all the available land was cultivated even on the steepest slopes, and that the numerous buses for public transportation were always full. In the 1980s, the two villages of Belan and Radino had a joint population of approximately 1,000 inhabitants. The images that my informants evoked resonate with those typically presented by the communist writers who glorified the success of the Rhodope economy under socialism: its industrialization,

urbanization, and the achievements in agriculture and education.

<sup>12</sup> Elderly villagers also recalled less happy experiences, especially in the 1950s, when they received little payment in kind and even less in cash.

Progressively, the payments were in cash and even payments in advance were proposed. All my elderly informants emphasized their relatively easy adaptation to socialist collectivization, in contrast to other parts of Bulgaria, especially the plains, where the peasants possessed far more land and animals (Gruev 2009).

Socialism typically created small industrial plants; many women in the Rhodopes worked as seamstresses. Many men were employed as drivers in the state-owned transportation company. Schools and kindergartens offered jobs and decisively contributed to raise the educational level. All these employers and the state-run cooperatives provided salaries.

The regime encouraged domestic agriculture that was supported through the use of equipment borrowed more or less legally from the state cooperative (Creed 1998).<sup>13</sup> The mountain villagers clearly benefited from getting a salary and being able at the same time to produce potatoes, beans, vegetables, meat, and milk for their own needs. This also meant self-exploitation

in domestic farming after the workday. Almost all my informants declared that there were between four and five ewes and one to two cows per house, plus usually one calf. The surface of the area that was allowed for hay harvesting, and thus the amount of hay, determined the number of animals each house was able to keep. The sheep and calves were indispensable for feeding the family members, village and town residents alike. It was important to keep a constant stock of animals for ritual purposes too, such as the Muslim holidays and ritual receptions in the houses; part of the meat left was preserved in jars and freezers (see Stamenova 1995

for the eastern Rhodopes). In addition, the collective farm and, since the middle of the 1960s, the meat-processing plant "Rodopa" used to purchase meat and milk at fixed prices. This provided the villagers with savings that they massively invested in house-building and renovation; they also held lavish weddings, soldier send-offs, and high school graduation parties. Despite the official tolerance and later encouragement to produce in the frame

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of the household, the government always set limits to household production, for instance by determining the legal size of farming land.

The postsocialist period saw the breakdown of the earlier stability of the domestic and village economies. After the collapse of socialism in November 1989, in the very beginning of the 1990s, the collective farm had to implement the new laws by selling the animals and all equipment (see Creed 1998: 219-262). Officially, the collective farm in Belan ceased to exist in 1995; the dismantling started in 1991 and most of its assets were sold by auction by 1992. The sheep and cattle were purchased by external companies. Villagers acquired some of the machines and equipment, and a few bought buildings.<sup>14</sup> Domestic agriculture in Belan lost the state cooperative and the meat-processing plant as the privileged buyers of its produce. The closing of small industries, such as the shirt-making and tractor-making factories, the sharp downsizing of the small wood-processing plant, and the dismantling of the state cooperative meant the end of regular salaries. Out-migration to the cities and in several cases abroad sharply increased around 2000. Home-produced foodstuffs, both for home consumption and for sale, became of great importance for those who stayed in the village and those who kept commuting to the city. The ways this produce was combined with unreliable and limited income from salaries, wages, and pensions changed.

The dominant political message in the 1990s was that each individual owner would start farming on his own, and that he would sell his produce on the "free market." The vague political discourse assumed that later, some would grow and absorb others, so that the rural areas would eventually reach a state of equilibrium within the new market economy: some would have larger market-oriented farms, others smaller ones, and yet others would give up this activity. This did not happen, at least not in the Rhodopes. Potatoes were the only cash crop that villagers produced on a larger scale. Yet, generally they did not specialize, but kept a diversified mainly domestic agriculture and had a preference for salaried jobs. The inhabitants of Belan and Radino were relatively successful in selling their potatoes until approximately 2008. In the late 1990s and even later, when Bulgarians were struck with a harsh financial crisis, trucks full of commodities such as sunflower oil, cabbage, flour, or washing powder came to barter these goods for local potatoes. Most villagers considered that they made good deals (Cellarius 2000). Potatoes were also sold for cash. When the market was opened to international competition and cheap Polish and Turkish potatoes invaded Bulgarian supermarkets, the interest in Rhodope potatoes declined. Most villagers reduced their production and cultivated only enough to meet their domestic needs. In addition, out-migration of young villagers meant lesser availability of workers. Nonetheless, as the

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Rhodope potato has remained a synonym of high quality, some kept good



relationships with long-term clients in other parts of the country and still manage to ship their potatoes directly to their customers. Rural households did not go back to earlier patterns of peasantry. Instead, rural people envisioned themselves as agricultural producers and as part of a larger bureaucratic and political system. Socialism decisively contributed to this worldview (Leonard and Kaneff 2002). Villagers continue to see themselves in this way, despite the neglect and contempt shown to them by the postsocialist political authorities (Creed 1998; Kaneff 2002). The next political signal came when Bulgaria started receiving EU subsidies for agriculture, but their effect is still marginal in the Rhodopes. For the villagers, the demise of the state-run farm has remained the symbolic moment when village prosperity ended. Limited job opportunities and the demographic decline have nourished the feeling of being disregarded by the political power. Tensions and fluctuations characterize the new economic situation. In Belan, three main modes of using sheep have emerged. The first is the minority breed for the market. The second, the most widespread use of sheep, is as a resource for domestic consumption. The use of lamb and dairy products to feed tourists in house-based tourism is a third, intermediary mode.

Agriculture and animal husbandry, sheep in particular, have uneven commercial success. After 1991, most villagers of Belan did not see sheep as a promising avenue for enrichment. Not only did they lack infrastructure and money to invest in large-scale sheep breeding, but the few adventurous risk-takers preferred to engage in business outside of the village. For none of the villagers is sheep breeding an occupation or a business in its own right, although one large-scale farmer considers sheep to be “an important business” that he pursues in combination with two other activities.<sup>15</sup> Immediately after the collapse of the socialist system, commercial dairy production appeared as a promising entrepreneurial adventure to the mayor of Belan, who acquired the former canteen of the collective farm and turned it into a dairy, buying cow and sheep milk from private owners to make cheese and yogurt. But this business, one of his numerous activities, did not prosper and he abandoned it in the mid 1990s. According to rumors, he made big money from the sale of former state property.

### **Common Pasturing and the Multiple Facets of the Domestic Economy**

The inroads of wider processes and state and international policies have threatened rural livelihoods based on salaries and entailed simultaneously

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shrinking of stockbreeding. However, sheep breeding still plays a role in Belan. The number of private animals has decreased, but they provide some houses with food and occasional cash. After the completion of collectivization in Belan in 1957, the private ewes—there were up to five per house—were given to the shepherd of the state-run farm during the summer to be shepherded with the farm flock; others formed several small flocks herded by private shepherds. The end of the state-cooperative flock and that of the services provided by the state-employed shepherd gave rise to the question of how to coordinate the individual households that owned animals. At the same time, the number of privately owned ewes in Belan decreased from 470 in 1989 to 350 in 2009.<sup>16</sup> This decrease resulted in the formation, already in the very beginning of the 1990s, of a unique village flock (one in

Belan and one in Radino). Many villagers keep animals for their own needs in food and for ritual purposes, the main of which is the sheep slaughter for *Kurban Bairam*. The houses receiving tourists prefer to slaughter their own animals for their tourists in order to avoid spending money. In addition, they buy from neighbors and from the large-scale herder. The houses that own only a few sheep have established group care for the animals borrowing some organizational patterns from the presocialist and socialist times. A shepherd is now hired by winter's end. The sheep owners organize an assembly to debate and elect one of the candidates. The shepherd receives a salary and food for lunch from those who use his services: one lunch for two sheep, plus 4 leva (around 2 Euro) per sheep per month in 2010. Why do the villagers need this collective care for the ewes? When I addressed my hostess with this question, she gave the usual explanation: We have six ewes. If we milk them twice per day, as it should be, we end up with a bit more than one liter of milk every time. If I want to make cheese, I need the milk to be fresh, almost warm after the milking. It must be processed immediately after milking, during a few hours. If I decide to make cheese every time I milk my six ewes, I will spend hours making cheese every day, twice per day. Every time, from one liter of milk. And how much cheese do I get from one liter? Some grams. Can you imagine spending three months making cheese every single day, a few hours per day, and every time using the whole outfit of wooden frames, cloths for drying, and receptacles in order to end up with a few grams every time? When I take the milk from the common flock three times in a row, I process it and in two days I'm done. The same rationale applies to yogurt making. Making cheese and yogurt in quantity renders it inconvenient to have a separate small flock. So, the villagers developed a new way to undertake their pastoral activities following an older pattern; they created the village flock. Only a few retired people prefer not to send their sheep to the village flock and still do their own shepherding.

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On the one hand, for those who keep sheep, meat, milk, and dairy produce are important components of the self-provisioning scheme of the domestic economy. On the other hand, their significance as market commodities has fluctuated, with seasonal tourism being the main but relatively limited avenue for commercialization. Yet, the coordination of sheep herding and milk measuring are important matters in village life. They are based on collaboration and collective calculation of the inputs and the outputs of every participating house, as in old times. The village flock is made possible through cooperation. The shareholders' objective is not to gain a profit but to use labor efficiently. The flock is also seen as one incarnation of the vitality of the village. Even those who do not keep animals enjoy seeing the sheep crossing the main village road. Village pasturing embellishes this cohesion. The members of the village flock act as shareholders. Milk measuring and the management of the common flock involve careful calculation of the milk that every house owning sheep may take in relation to the contribution it makes. Collective herding and milking serves the interests of individual houses. When the lambs have been weaned and the ewes have already joined the village flock, the villagers measure their milk two or three times in the period between their arrival at the flock and the moment when they get pregnant again by summer's end. These successive operations of measuring allow recalibration of the quantities that each shareholder is entitled to take home. Since the milk of the ewes starts to diminish in July, there are

two or three milking periods. During each of the periods, every house takes a predetermined quantity. Following a list of names, each day a person representing his or her house takes the milk of the whole flock until his or her predefined quantity for the given milking period is reached. When the last person on the list has received milk, a new measuring takes place in order to establish a new list and start a new milking period. During the second period the recalibrated quantity is lower. If enough milk is left at the end of the second period, a third period is set up in the same way.

My hosts in Belan sent six ewes to join the flock in May 2010. They received 80 liters from the first milking period (from three milkings in a row: one morning, one evening, and one the next morning) and made more than 30 kg of cheese; they took 30 liters of milk at the end of June 2010 from the second milking period.<sup>17</sup> In total, there were 127 ewes<sup>18</sup> belonging to 43 houses out of 151 inhabited houses in Belan.<sup>19</sup> Sunday, 9 May was the day of the measuring. The operation took place at the sheepfold in the village, located not far from the houses, on the border with the forest. The shepherd and Emin, the former shepherd of the state-run farm, did the milking. Before this practice, adopted around fifteen years ago, everyone milked his or her own ewes.<sup>20</sup> The villagers say that in order to avoid cheating, this operation is done now by the two men for the entire flock. They alone are

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allowed into the milking pen.<sup>21</sup> The milk from all the ewes belonging to one house is put together and measured with carafes, as in bars—50 ml, 100 ml, 200 ml, 500 ml, 1 liter.

The former mayor was chosen to write down all names and quantities and to collect money to pay the shepherd. Representatives of almost all participating houses were present. Those who could not come did not take their milk from the first milking. The milk was put in a bucket called “the common” (*obshtoto*), which was also duly recorded in the notebook. This common milk was sold and the money was used to fix the sheepfold. The list of forty-three names started with the name of the representative of the house whose ewes had given the highest quantity and went on down to the one with the lowest quantity. Thus, the quantity of milk of each one determines his position on the list and the order of distribution. One's share is proportional to the quantity given by his ewes at the moment of measuring. The subtlest operation is to decide about the number by which the sample quantity should be multiplied in order to define the share. In 2010 it was 50; if one's ewes gave one liter, then this person takes 50 liters from the first milking period. This decision is taken collectively by those present at the measuring. Several factors are taken into consideration when defining this number: the availability of grass, the number of ewes in the flock, and the number of those still in the barns with their late-born lambs. In other words, the more optimistic the villagers' bet on these factors, the higher the multiplier. Usually milking ends by 10 August and everyone has to take his or her milk before this date.

The collective coordination for the sake of better respect of individual interest and careful calculation of inputs and outputs constitutes the backbone of the operation. The main advantage of collective herding resides in the possibility to take a share of the herd's milk in order to make cheese within a couple of days. Everyone gives a calculated, proportional contribution to the collective management: money and food to the shepherd;

milk for the work of the milker (who received 100 liters of milk from the village flock in 2010); milk sold for the maintenance of the sheepfold.

Representatives

of each house clean the sheepfold several times, depending on the number of their ewes. The bookkeeper is exonerated from paying the shepherd as a reward for his or her work. Milk from the whole flock is also donated for the village *kurban*.

Sheep milk is a source of pride. There is a saying that “the lambs are in Neveno (a neighboring village), but the milk is in Belan,” which refers to the fact that in Belan the lambs are weaned earlier and more milk is available for consumption, while in the nearby village the ewes stay longer with their lambs and the lambs grow faster. When milking is finished, the milkers drink a glass of warm milk, praising its high quality. Sheep yogurt and

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cheese are considered local luxuries. Milking the village flock is a masculine activity, while making yogurt and cheese from it is a feminine one. However, when locals and tourists praise the yogurt, it is rarely presented as “made by the wife.” It is presented as “our yogurt, homemade, from our sheep.” Simultaneously, a nostalgic and even apocalyptic narrative dominates the way in which the villagers recount the recent changes. A feeling of material dispossession stems not only from the disestablishment of the state-run farm, but also from the subsequent devaluation of their farming activities. It is expressed by the saying “It is not worth the work you put in it.” People constantly speak of their “struggle for life” (*borba za zhivot*), meaning that making a living demands everyday hard toil. The saying also implies that the price to pay for going beyond the baseline of survival is, sometimes, conflict.

Economically successful houses and those worse-off have ewes in the village flock. Not keeping animals is seen sometimes as a source of freedom, for example by retired couples receiving pensions, whose children make a living without the support of their village relatives. For others, sheep occupy an important cluster in the complex configuration of activities and ideas that make up their house economy. This cluster is differently utilized in more or less well-off houses. The family with eight ewes in the village herd in 2010, that together gave the highest sample quantity of milk, is probably the wealthiest family in Belan. They receive two pensions and three salaries and own a grocery store. The family has two houses, the most visited by tourists. Not only do their tourists consume their agricultural produce and home-produced meat and milk, but they often buy sheep milk and lambs from the large-scale farm. In their case, the high number of ewes in the village flock reflects their intense production, a prerequisite for their successful involvement in rural tourism. They do not occupy the top of the local social hierarchy because they have animals. Rather, they have succeeded in using these animals intelligently in combination with other house resources, with the labor of all household members, with income from salaries and pensions, and a grocery store. Moreover, they control certain decisions that give impetus to their tourist business, which is in fact their major money-making activity.

Sheep are important also for families taking in fewer or no tourists and faced with high job instability. My hosts had six ewes in the village flock in 2010. They emphasize that this demands hard work, an ever-lasting value

in rural Bulgaria. Moreover, they enjoy consuming their “ecologically pure” foodstuffs (*ekologichno chisto*). But they experience livestock keeping as an attempt to compensate for material weaknesses. Being unable to live from their salaries, the couple, their adult children, and their grandchildren consume much of what they themselves produce. Occasionally they

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sell potatoes and beans. My hosts also take in tourists, to whom they may offer lamb and dairy products. But they view stockbreeding as a necessity and less as an activity supporting money-yielding tourism. Thus, in Belan, lamb and milk products are consumed within the house, sold to tourists within the frame of house-based tourism, and occasionally traded beyond the village. Social differentiation does not directly derive from more or less involvement in sheep breeding, and it did not under socialism. After socialism, sheep have been used to sustain the household; only in a few cases have they been instrumental in facilitating upward economic mobility. Such mobility has occurred when animals have been successfully marketed in combination with other domestic goods and services, as part of a cycle from the domestic economy to the market and back to the house as money return (see Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 66-72). Over the last ten years, economic success has been determined by the skillful marketing of the domestic economy in the frame of house-based tourism, with sheep as one of the important assets of this domestic economy. Thus sheep have played an unexpected role in the process of social stratification. And sheep have become the basic material and symbolic stuff of the village *kurban*.

**Conclusion**

For the inhabitants of Belan, the end of socialism meant freedom to circulate and receive guests in this formerly strictly controlled border area. It also meant constant economic instability. The village *kurban* created in 1992 has become a form of communal hospitality. The ritual points to the exact opposite of the tense and sharp stratification that has shaped the political and economic hierarchies of Bulgarian society. The model this *kurban* suggests is a radical departure from both leader-making elective democracy and wealth-based social differentiation. The current ritual is a model of an egalitarian community. No one is celebrated as a leader, including those who do more for the village or for the event. No hierarchy is recognized in *kurban*, though its organization relies on several hierarchical relationships; the latter are thoroughly downplayed at the moment of the public food distribution, and to a large extent before and after. Belan's villagers experience social fracturing and uneven access to resources, but in the village *kurban*, integration is central and social differentiation is denied. Everyone is welcome and fed.

Whereas the economy creates social disjuncture, notably differentiation according to wealth, unemployment, job instability, and low-paid work, the ritual includes all villagers and guests. Its anti-utilitarian grammar, expressed in gifting and free work, celebrates sharing of all with all, as opposed to meritocracy and self-interest as expressed in the dominant

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economic ideology. Whereas the very idea of the free market implies the need to strengthen competition, the village *kurban* avoids elements smacking of intracommunity competition. (Of course, Belan villagers can and do claim proudly that attendance at their *kurban* outnumbers that of the

other villages.) No one makes a profit, except those who sell their sheep for the ritual slaughter. Even these villagers refrain from haggling: the same price applies to all and equity dictates that none of the “candidate” vendors should be left empty-handed.

State-administered religious divisions and violent name-change campaigns against Muslims have marked the presocialist and socialist past of this region. Given this history, a new ritual might have been expected to feature strong religious elements and perhaps to stress an exclusively Muslim identity. Instead, the postsocialist village *kurban* softens the public religious elements in the course of its comprehensive symbolic erasure of divisions. In this way, the ritual not only fosters cohesion between Muslims and Christians; it also integrates those numerous participants who do not define it in religious terms at all.

Although the postsocialist village *kurban* draws on an older pattern of religious sacrifice, it adapts this older pattern to address contemporary concerns. It builds partly on an earlier model of ritual togetherness, but does not really replicate the presocialist spring *kurban* of sheep-owning families. It practically and symbolically transcends the families, as well as all religious and social divisions. The ritual transforms economy in a noninstrumental

direction that contributes to the wider making of sociality. The consensus around *kurban* organization is striking. Sociality, rather than competitive self-promotion, makes the event possible and allows the ritual to instill a unique sense of togetherness. Once a year, these potentialities are accomplished in ritual practice.

## Notes

1. I worked in two neighboring villages, Belan and Radino (all village and personal names are pseudonyms). This chapter deals primarily with Belan, the larger one. Situated in the very southern part of the central Rhodope mountains, together they have around 500 inhabitants divided into 227 households (official figures). Fieldwork was carried out in 2009-2010, in the framework of the Economy and Ritual group. I owe much to the attentive reading and suggestions of Deema Kaneff, Gerald Creed, Ilia Iliev, and members of the Economy and Ritual group. The archival research was made possible by the kind and efficient support of Tanya Mareva and Katya Sulinadjieva from the Regional Historical Museum, Smolian, and Ana Luleva and Milena Benovska-Sabkova from the Ethnographic Institute and Museum, Sofia. Vihra Barova has provided outstanding local expertise. I thank them all.

2. According to the mayor's office. These data tend to count more households than a

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count based on domestic groups that share at least part of their budget, housing, food, and productive assets and activities. For example, a domestic group formed by an elderly couple and their two married sons with their wives and children are considered to be three separate households by the mayor's office, although their livelihoods are related at many levels: they may have a family business together, own animals together, work together in farming, and share meals every day. In this case the members define their domestic group as “we,” “our house,” or “our family,” though they distinguish between the nuclear families inside.

3. I conducted a survey in spring 2010 among twenty-five households (defined as units sharing housing and production assets, and having their meals together) living in Belan and Radino, as part of a standardized group questionnaire. Two of the questions were about what was perceived as the household's most important source of income and what kind of agricultural resources they had. The survey revealed that none of the twenty-five households placed animal breeding and agriculture in general as a main source of income. Out of the twenty-five households,

eight cited salaries, seven pensions, five salaries and pensions, and five private businesses (two of them in tourism). When asked about the animals they had, twenty-two out of the twenty-five had animals: seven had sheep, eleven had cattle and sheep, four had only cattle.

4. This man was trained by local *hodjas* and has no institutional affiliation with any official Muslim authority, although he has gone to the mosque since the 1990s. He was the first to join the state-run farm in 1950. He has a reputation for always voting for the socialist (ex-communist) party.

5. The local Gypsies are more integrated than in other parts of Bulgaria where the relationships with the rest of the population are hostile and exclusionary. Yet, the local peaceful relationships with Gypsies, described by non-Gypsies as “our Gypsies,” “good ones,” and “not like the other Gypsies,” follow a pattern of relative inclusion widespread in Eastern Europe.

6. The village played a role in trans-border relations. After 1912, a customhouse was erected in Belan, which was transformed first into a guesthouse of the school, then into an administrative building of the collective farm. Today it is being transformed into a private hotel.

7. Massive ethnographic expeditions of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences took place in the 1970s and 1980s, collecting narratives from elderly villagers about the ways of life in the past. The notes available in the archives contain multiple indications of personal memories narrated by the interviewees. I am aware of the political bias of these expeditions, as they aimed to show a common Bulgarian Christian origin of the Muslim and Christian inhabitants of the Rhodopes and a generalized fading of religion. However, I take the archives as a valuable source of information about some aspects of the ritual and economic past of the population. Later studies of *kurban* (e.g., Blagoev 2004 on *kurban* rituals among the Muslims in Bulgaria) largely draw on the materials generated by these expeditions.

8. Archives of the Regional Historical Museum in Smolian. National program “Rhodopes” 1975 and 1981-1985. The funds used for this section are: National program “Rhodopes” 1975: VI-20, village of Mugla, and VI-21, region of Devin; National program “Rhodopes” 1981-1985: VI-130 from 1981, villages of Mogil *Transformations of a Ritual* \* 133

itsa, Borikovo, Bukata, Chereshovo; VI-130/3 from 1981, villages of Mogilitsa, Borikovo, Bukovo, Uhlovitsa; VI-34-130/1 from 1981, villages of Mogilitsa and Borikovo; VI-126/4 from 1984, village of Smilian; VI-126/6 from 1984, village of Smilian; VI-188 from 1984, village of Smilian.

9. Archives of the Regional Historical Museum in Smolian, VI.126/4. National program ‘Rhodopes’ 1981-1985. Animal breeding, village of Smilian, region of Smolian. Valentin Lazarov, notes taken in June 1984: 26-27.

10. Archives of the Regional Historical Museum in Smolian, VI.126/6. National program “Rhodopes” 1981-1985. Food and consumption habits, village of Smilian, region of Smolian. Lilia Radeva, notes taken in June 1984: 15.

11. Archives of the Regional Historical Museum in Smolian, VI. 188. National program “Rhodopes” 1981-1985. Traditional spiritual culture, village of Smilian, region of Smolian. Liliana Dimitrova, notes taken in May 1984: 111-112.

12. A prominent figure among those writers was Tsviatko Monov (1985; see also *Rodopski sbornik* 1983).

13. Salaries from small industries and collective farms were continuously supplemented by products from household farming, namely, “land for personal use” : plots of about 1 decare (one tenth of a hectare) per family were allowed since the beginning of collectivization. The size of the authorized plot increased in 1957 to 3 decares. This early-revised form of rural socialism became deliberate state policies of “self-satisfying” (*samozadovoliavane*) in the last socialist decade. The processes in the south-central Rhodopes were part of a national policy. The size of the land for “personal use” fluctuated according to various political trends but the principle remained unquestioned until the demise of socialism. Criteria such as the number of household members, their status and gender (retired/working, men/women), and their productivity in the collective farm determined the acreage given to each household (see Creed 1998: 94-96). In 1988, 32 percent of the arable land belonging

to the village of Belan was in the hands of “personal holders,” 407 families using an average of 3.9 decares each; there were 560 animals in the collective farm and 518 in the personal stables (State Archives Smolian, Fund 503/2/6). Nevertheless, the collective farm was still the main supplier of the official markets: on the eve of democracy in 1989, the state purchased 785,000 liters of milk from the collective farm, whereas the personal holders sold 379,000 liters. The figures for meat (31,000 kg against 18,000 kg) and potatoes (1,198,000 kg against 26,000 kg) confirm this prevalence (State Archives Smolian, Fund 503/2/5). However, at the meetings of the economic council of the collective farm between 1988 and 1990, household production from the exploitation of state-owned land, known as the *akord* system, according to which villagers had to produce for the collective farm (see also Creed 1998: 90-94), was praised for its higher efficiency and lower production cost (State Archives Smolian, Fund 503/2/4). Work on the personal and *akord* plots and care for personal animals demanded efforts during the whole year from all household members, including children. The support on behalf of the collective farm was crucial: it provided machines, seeds, fertilizers, animal food, and other inputs (Creed 1998: 96-101). Relatively high self-provisioning in potatoes, beans and other vegetables, meat, and milk and dairy products characterized the Rhodope mountains in the last two decades of socialism (Stamenova 1995: 194-201).

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14. One of the buildings of the former state-run farm was bought by a villager, an engineer, who repairs trucks and machinery, and who acted as the head of the farm's “liquidation commission.” Another compound of buildings was first bought by an external company that raised cows. Later it was acquired by a family from Radino that raises around twenty cows in one of the barns. The owners of the compound sublet one of the buildings to the large-scale farmer of Belan who keeps over 200 ewes and their lambs there.

15. This farmer had 214 ewes in spring 2010 and almost the same number of lambs. His “sideline” activities are the cultivation of potatoes for sale and the maintenance of some municipal roads. A few houses give him their ewes to be pastured until the winter. A former veterinary doctor, this 45-year-old man got a job at the collective state farm in the very last years of its existence. In the 1990s, he decided to develop his own agricultural business, because taking care of animals was what he knew best. In recent years, he has been trying to sell dairy products and he was the only producer who counted on making some profit from his cheese in summer 2010. The houses receiving many tourists usually do not produce enough to supply their tourists and buy lambs, milk, and cheese from this farmer. Locals also buy from him. In 2010, this farmer sold more milk products than usual. He told me that the price of the potatoes, his main produce for many years, had dropped dramatically; he could not earn enough from potatoes and road maintenance to cover his investments and to pay salaries to five employees. In previous years, lamb was a major product for him and milk was not. By the end of May 2010, he had already produced 400 kg of cheese. He considered this to be a risk, because he had never produced significant quantities before. However, he felt himself “covered” by the EU subsidies that he had received for the first time in 2010. “My self-esteem is higher now, because I have received something,” he said, stressing that the EU subsidies meant recognition of his activity by a political authority, and not only economic support.

16. The figures for 2009 include the herd of the large farm (214 ewes in 2010).

17. The extended family of my hosts has nine members who normally consume the cheese until Christmas, in addition to cow cheese. During the summer, almost all villagers eat sheep yogurt. It is usual to buy extra sheep milk from the largest farm.

18. This does not mean a decrease in the absolute number of ewes. In 2009, the ewes gave birth earlier and could let their lambs alone earlier. There were 196 ewes in the herd, according to the book carefully kept each year. In the beginning, the ewes are not given concentrated fodder, in order to let them show how much milk they are “really able to give” on the day of measuring. What is considered as the “real” quantity of milk is the lowest possible, that is, when the animals have not been fed with concentrated fodder.



19. When the bookkeeper of the collective flock writes the name of a sheep owner, this is the name of the person who, the day of the measuring of the milk, came to represent the whole family. This person represents “us” or “our house,” as the villagers say.

20. The sheep have marks, so that everyone can recognize to whom they belong.

21. John Campbell described masculine control over sheep milking *and* cheese making among the Zagore Sarakatsani of northern Greece. There was no sharp prohibition

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denying women’s right to do these tasks; it was a masculine domain, but not one based on the absolute exclusion of women (Campbell 1964).

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