GERALD W. CREED

Constituted through Conflict: Images of Community (and Nation) in Bulgarian Rural Ritual

ABSTRACT Following the 20th anniversary of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities,* this article extrapolates how attention to actual notions of community might redirect his important intervention. It suggests that locally and culturally specific ideas about collectivity shape the experience and expectations of national-level projections. To demonstrate this outcome the analysis focuses on Bulgarian mumming—spectacular winter rituals in which threatening masked figures transverse villages to banish evil and bring good fortune. While these rituals clearly reinforce social solidarity, they represent a local notion of community in which conflict, both intra- and interethnic, is elemental and constitutive. This image of community does not demand consensus or homogeneity when imagined on a national scale. Such variations in community notions may help explain the diversity of national experiences increasingly documented by ethnographers. [Keywords: community, mumming, Roma, nationalism, Benedict Anderson]

WHY DO SOME NATIONALISMS succumb to what Tom Nairn calls the "descent into dementia" (1977:359), evident in subnational contests and violent conflicts, while others avoid it? The following analysis suggests that culturally contingent notions of "community" may play a role. To illustrate I draw on ritual enactments in rural Bulgaria that vividly demonstrate local notions of collectivity. These enactments are saturated with conflict, both among ethnic Bulgarians and between Bulgarians and Roma, whose images permeate the rituals. I believe these events reveal a notion of "community" that is constituted through conflict, which may explain why the "imagined community" of Bulgarian nationalism has not provoked exclusions similar to those of its Balkan neighbors. In Bulgaria, conflict is accommodated *within* community notions (imagined or otherwise).

Once considered the prerogative of political science and history, the study of nationalism has expanded within anthropology to rival, if not eclipse, its ethnographic predecessor: the study of ethnicity. This reflects the increasing resonance of national identity for the people we study (both because we have incorporated new groups within our purview and because national concerns increasingly impinge on groups we previously studied). But it also reflects new understandings of nationalism beginning in the early 1980s that laid its cultural essence bare. While anthropologists contributed to this discovery (Gellner 1983; Handler 1984), seminal work by historians and political scientists with anthropological sensibilities helped

spotlight the cultural forces involved in national processes (Anderson 1991; Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983).

The work of Benedict Anderson was especially catalytic. He saw nationalism as a change in consciousness brought about by cultural shifts (driven by print capitalism) which made it possible for local populations to imagine an affinity with unknown people across large territories. Twenty years later, his notion of "imagined communities" informs most anthropological examinations of nationalism and has become an accepted synonym for the nation even among those who repugn his Marxist analytic. This formulation has helped reveal the historical and political construction of national ideas and attachments, but it has been less productive in explaining why established nationalisms often generate new exclusions or why nationalism produces such different consequences in different places. I believe that this is because scholars, following Anderson's lead, have focused almost solely on the imaginative quality of nationalism without attending to the foundational notion of community.[1] This perpetuates the limitations of Anderson's analysis and accounts for why all the work invoking his concept has not advanced our understanding of nationalism proportionate to its volume. Shifting attention to the notion of community may provide new insights into persistent imponderables of nationalism.

How can we account for the exclusive focus on the adjective in Anderson's formulation? As stated, this was Anderson's intent in coining the phrase, but I believe so many people have obliged because the notion of community

reflects a taken-for-granted quality that obviates critical attention. Despite repeated challenges and critiques this quality continues to include images of uniformity, cohesion, consensus, and cooperation—characteristics we might refer to as "romantic." The search for such a community easily leads to social fragmentation or violence as people strive for associations that are uniform and cohesive. So the national tendency to spawn separatist movements, or alternatively to construct unity through cultural homogenization and ethnic cleansing, are best understood not as the result of the need to materialize imagined relations but as the product of a community conceptualization that implies uniformity and harmony. In other words, the major negative consequences of nationalism are not due simply to its imaginary quality, but to the fact that it is imagined *as a community,* in which the notion of community carries romantic expectations. By extension, different outcomes and variants of nationalism may reflect different notions of community. If so, we need to examine community as a culturally contingent notion and document what it means to particular people in local and historical contexts. This, of course, applies to community invocations other than nationalism. Community is not just a conceptual tool for delineating social relations but, increasingly, a culturally specific expectation about the nature of social relations, with consequences for anything conceived in its image. Here I focus on its relevance for nationalism in an effort to push beyond the rote and, consequently, paralyzing invocation of Anderson.

This suggestion evolved from my effort to understand why the violent nationalist conflicts pervading the Balkans in the 1990s never spilled over into Bulgaria despite the presence of historical animosities, ethnic minorities, nationalist agitators, and irredentist territorial claims equivalent to those blamed for the Yugoslav wars. Obviously, there are a plethora of differences to explain this divergence, but among them may be particular expectations about community. This possibility was suggested to me by my observations of Bulgarian mumming rituals. As elsewhere, these masked rituals are decidedly about community, indeed, I believe they are explicit statements on the local nature of collectivity. In Bulgaria they are full of conflict, contention, and selfish displays, some of which are expressed in ethnic idioms (referencing Roma, Turks/Arabs and "darkies"). The notion of community they suggest is far from the romantic image that would drive division or ethnic cleansing. Instead, they reflect a field of dense, overlapping relationships, many of which are conflictive and contentious.

In what follows, I examine mumming rituals in rural Bulgaria to document a notion of community in which conflict is not antithetical to community but, rather, a constitutive element of community commitment and sentiment. If we replace Anderson's understanding of community with this one, it may help explain Bulgaria's particular experience with nationalism. If so, it reveals a new place to look for explanations of the multiple and nuanced variations of nationalism increasingly documented by ethnographers. To support this claim, I first attempt to document the perpetuity of romantic assumptions about community in analyses of nationalism. I then examine mumming cross-culturally to verify its bearing on community relations. From there I take up the case of Bulgarian mumming, which I use to verify a notion of community based in conflict. My conclusion extrapolates what such a notion might mean when projected (imagined) onto the state.

THE LIMITS OF IMAGINATION

The concept of community has been thoroughly and repeatedly cross-examined, but for me this is part of the fascination: Why does community continue to be employed so routinely and *casually* in academic parlance given its excoriated past? Whether fieldwork is rural, urban, multi-sited, transnational, or virtual, most contemporary anthropologists define their foci as communities, and they do so with almost no specification of what that means.[2] Scholars seem to assume that past criticism legitimates contemporary usage, as if earlier efforts thoroughly and permanently redeemed the term. This assumption denies the power of language and discourse, especially when pervasive popular usage continually threatens to reappropriate the term. It also rejects the conclusions of some of the most penetrating critics of the concept, who have insisted it must be abandoned (Leeds 1973; Young 1986).

I am not the only one concerned about the concept's ever-expanding popularity: Zygumunt Bauman (2001) sees community as a postmodern security blanket, Nikolas Rose (1999) believes it represents a new means of governance, and Miranda Joseph (2002) implies it has become the handmaiden of late capitalism. These various roles may account for what Joseph aptly calls the term's "relentless return" (2002), usually with its romantic baggage in tow. Elsewhere (Creed 2003) I have recounted in detail how romantic notions eluded various critical exorcisms. The most common dynamic, evident in research from the late 1950s to the present, is the way criticisms of consensual community models based on the documentation of conflict often lead to the conclusion that there is no community, or a crisis of community, rather than a redefinition of the term incorporating conflict (e.g., Banfield 1958; Cancian 1992).

Other scholars have taken up the role of conflict in group formation and dynamics. Indeed, recognizing conflict, opposition, and contestation as constitutive of social groups was central to both Marxist and postmodern critiques of "culture" as a unified, homogenous concept (Abu-Lughod 1991; Clifford 1988; Wolf 1984). However, these indictments rarely implicated the concept of community. Indeed, the concept of community became even more common as a replacement for the troubled notion of culture, suggesting a conceptual displacement of these qualities onto "community." As Jaenette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern note for the English town of Alltown:

"While it is well known . . . that community is as much a forum of gossip and the generation of stigmas as it is about communication and respect, this divisive side is often missing in academic commentary" (2000:151). If conflict and contestation are assumed by most anthropologists who use the term *community*, they rarely specify this. By contrast, contemporary scholars who focus more explicitly on the term use it precisely for its romantic connotation (Cancian 1992; Cohen 2000; Mallon 1983; Wall 1990). These meanings are not shared by all anthropologists who use the term, but the fact that some anthropologists and historians use community in this way with approbation confirms that romantic associations remain endemic to the term at some level.

To return to the issue of nationalism, Anderson's formulation is perhaps the best evidence. As previously indicated, the fact that his bedrock noun has attracted little attention (at least compared to its imaginary qualifier) confirms that it carries a commonsensical understanding that needs little examination or elaboration. What is that understanding? What is imagined in Anderson's formulation if not the collectivism, consensus and experiential unity I call romantic? For Anderson, these are the very things that print capitalism made it possible to imagine. Among the few words he actually devotes to the community concept, he says the nation is "imagined as a *community,* because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (1991:7). In other words, he employs the term *community precisely for its romantic implications*. He can thus conclude that (contra Gellner) "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (1991:6). This is because the singular notion of community he utilizes is an unattainable romantic one. He does not even wrestle with the redundant implications of this claim, which renders his idea of nation a metaimaginary (an "imagined, imagined group," if you will).

Anderson allows that communities differ in the "style in which they are imagined" (1991:6), but for him the nation constitutes a single style, rather than a product shaped by culturally distinct community images. He also recognizes different types of nationalism. This, in fact, is one of the major contributions of his analysis, but the differences he delineates are determined primarily by timing ("creole pioneers" vs. "the last wave"), and the distinctive consequences of different time frames do not pertain to different notions of community. Community remains a generic romantic entity. But if we reject his understanding of community and see the notion as a cultural and historical variable, then his framework takes on new explanatory potential. We can start to look at how different conceptualizations of community shape the nationalisms modeled on them, or, perhaps, more likely, how alien notions of community are imposed by external models of the nation.

At least one well-documented case verifies how notions of community can shape nationalist outcomes. The path-breaking work on Fiji by John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (2001) challenges Anderson's notion of imagined communities with that of "represented communities," in which the legal, ritual, and electoral processes of decolonization replace the homogenizing and identity processes of modernity. They demonstrate how homogenous (romantic) images of community held by the colonial authorities produced a vision of the Fijian nation that excluded Asian populations. Kelly and Kaplan retain the notion of community, but they argue explicitly "against the homogenous empty community in contemporary social theory" (2001:30). Their notion of "represented communities" attends to what is actually being represented, whereas Anderson's use of "imagined communities" assumes a particular notion of community and focuses on how it comes to be conceivable.

Another postcolonial case suggests a different outcome. Partha Chatterjee's (1993) notion of community is neither imagined nor coterminous with the nation but, rather, an indigenous quality that survived colonial domination to distinguish the hybrid nationalism of the colony. For him the presence or absence of community distinguishes different variants of nationalism. If we purge the vestiges of romanticism and suggest that what Chatterjee sees as a lack of community may be a different notion of community, then his case also supports my contention that notions of community shape variants of nationalism. Once we accept this we can no longer operate with vague, a priori understandings of community. Instead, we have to decipher culturally contingent notions of collectivity. How do we get at these notions? One strategy is to examine communal dramatizations such as mumming in which social relations are vividly self-represented.

MUMMING, COMMUNITY, NATION

Mumming is a generic term for masked rituals of European origin commonly performed at Christmas and New Years, but also around Shrovetide and All Saints Day. Examined comparatively, mumming practices run a gamut from ribald house visits by groups of crudely disguised villagers to large urban parades with elaborately costumed neighborhood units. A mummer's play is central to several traditions and is often associated with the ancient origins of theater. Its bawdy and socially transgressive masquerade elements obviously overlap with carnival traditions. Indeed, in Greece events that mirror Bulgarian mumming are called "carnival" and participants *"karnavalia"* (Cowan 1992). Historical accounts of carnival in Trinidad refer to participants as mummers (Crowley 1996) and discussions of New Orleans Mardi Gras acknowledge the contribution of Anglo-Irish mumming traditions (Halpert 1969:54). In one of the few efforts to characterize mumming rituals comparatively, Herbert Halpert (1969) devised a four-part typology of activities based on degree of formality and location of activity: (1) the informal house visit; (2) the visit with a formal performance or play; (3) informal wandering

around the village or town usually accompanied by boisterous behavior; and (4) formal outdoor movements such as processions and parades. Examples of these mumming elements, separately and in concert, are documented throughout Europe and the New World.

Despite significant similarities, the variety of practices included in the category limit the value of treating mumming as a discrete generic phenomenon, and I use the term primarily for heuristic convenience. What we can say, however, is that nearly all reports of mumming tell us something about the nature of collective social relations. Indeed, these enactments are usually explicit statements about the nature of local social relations; as such they reveal much about what community might mean for local populations. As Don Handelman notes about public events generally: "It is vital to the ongoing existence of any more-or-less dense network of persons that there exist media through which members communicate to themselves in concert about the characters of their collectivities" (Handelman 1990:15). Dorothy Noyes goes further to suggest that "community is made real in performance" (1995:468). Mumming is the quintessential example. These are not only archetypal "community" rituals; they are usually symbolic commentaries on the very nature of community relations. As Henry Glassie puts it, "mumming is a symbolic essay on the drama of social interchange" (1975:133).

Mumming may even be constitutive. Glassie (1975: 71–72) allows that the different rhymes recited by different mumming troops in Ireland actually helped define community boundaries. Similarly, Michelle Bigenho (1999) claims that the indigenous community *(ayllu)* in highland Bolivia is delineated by the movement and sound of the carnival trek—the community is actually defined by carnival practice. Clearly these types of rituals play a particularly significant role in relation to the categories and relations we refer to as community.

What makes mumming even more expository in relation to the nation is its intermediate status between family and state ritual. While family-based rituals such as weddings and funerals may engage entire communities, and even invoke the nation, the focus remains on the family unit and the ritual is usually perceived as essentially a family event. At the other extreme, the state rituals and invented traditions that have captivated scholars of nationalism are more reflections of an established national image than windows onto local understanding of community. As Pamala Ballinger (2003) illustrates with World War II memorials, these types of commemorations efface alternatives in an effort to emphasize national uniformity—they eclipse local communities. In contrast, mumming and similar rituals do not celebrate a singular unit, nor do they strive to replace lower-order identities with higher-order ones. These rituals are expressly about the articulation of the culturally significant groupings within which people live. They present a symbolic physiology of the social organism rather than a descriptive anatomy.

Here it is important to recall that the word *nation* is rooted in ideas of relatedness by blood (Hobsbawm 1990). This makes images of kinship and family as potentially significant to national identifications as "community" (Connor 1994; Williams 1995), a link obvious in the family metaphors used for the nation such as "motherland" and "fatherland" (Danforth 1995; Delaney 1995). Still, expectations about relations within a "nation" are not just family sentiments writ large. This suggests that analyses of nationalism could benefit from looking at how notions of family and community articulate in the worldview and everyday life of local populations. If nations are imagined communities, then it is certainly important that most people experience communities through component groups such as families (as well as the numerous other divisions that may apply in particular contexts). In ideas about the complexity of social relations between groups, we find expectations often projected onto the nation. Mumming is expressly about these ideas.

Glassie (1975) connects Irish mumming directly to the communal ethnos associated with open-field cultivation and the need for cooperation between village families. The decline of the community's socioeconomic significance spelled the end of Irish mumming. In Newfoundland, perhaps the most analyzed case of mumming, Gerald Sider (1986) connects the practice to the complex communal and family relations necessitated by the organization of family fisheries. Mumming emerged and disappeared with this production complex. Handelman (1990) offers an alternative view in which mumming mediates suspicions about outsiders, but also about the selfish stranger believed to lurk within local residents, both of which are threats to community. Jane Cowan (1992) reveals carnival celebrations as an arena of struggle for opposing political factions in a northern Greek town. These are not rituals defined by a singular national image, but a reflection of local community relations. What better place to grasp the array of expectations that might inform a national entity imagined as a community?

To make the case I suggest a literal interpretation, or what might be called an "anti-interpretation" of these events. Most investigations of mumming and similar rituals rely on the notions of reversal (Bakhtin 1968) and anti-structure (Turner 1969), or what Handelman (1990:156) suggests is better described as "inversion–reversion." In this paradigm, spectacular but temporary violations confirm and affirm everyday social parameters (see also Gluckman 1963). I am not denying the validity of these theories, but following Abner Cohen's (1993) analysis of London's Carnival, I believe some meanings are more direct. The excessive violation of social norms in these events seems to demand extraordinary explanation, but these efforts deflect attention from the rituals' more straightforward statements. By emphasizing inversion we may miss spectacular statements about the quotidian.

This possibility suggests that we supplement Victor Turner and Mikhail Baktin with Clifford Geertz and read

elements of social structure into/from mumming "texts."[3] Interestingly, Geertz (1973) popularized his approach with a rather mundane event—a cockfight, rather than a spectacle such as mumming. Perhaps the type of event influences the choice of interpretive theory. When the activity seems to conform to social norms we accept a literal reading, when it seems to violate social norms we assume it cannot be a direct statement and opt for inversion. If so, our preconceptions of normalcy restrict our interpretative insights. I am suggesting that many mumming violations may not be violations at all, but, rather, exaggerated statements of the mundane. For example, while Glassie believes mumming promotes social solidarity, he points out that "the boastful, weakly motivated fight in the drama is the kind people have seen" (1975:134). One might also ask why Newfoundlanders are so suspicious of a person's real character, including their own, if experience has not revealed good cause? Bulgarian mumming is as much about such actual community relations as it is about reversals or alternatives.

BULGARIAN MUMMING

Bulgarian mumming includes all the elements elaborated by Halpert's typology. Here, I focus on local village-based rituals rather than the urban festivals that bring together mumming groups from numerous villages in a paradelike competition reminiscent of Mardi Gras or the Philadelphia Mummer's Parade (cf. Welch 1970). In the village context, mumming is an agrarian ritual intended to drive off evil spirits and bring fertility to the land, animals, and people. Actually, the Bulgarian rituals lumped together in English translation as *mumming* consist of a collection of locally differentiated practices known by many distinct local terms. A primary division is between New Year and pre-spring activities. The latter, commonly known as *kukeri,* are found throughout southeastern and south-central Bulgaria. They are usually pegged to the beginning of Lent, but many villages in the east have forgotten or forsaken the connection and celebrate on the most convenient weekend in February or early March. New Year's mumming, most commonly known as *survakari,* is found south of Sofia in the western part of the country. It takes place on January 1 or January 14 (New Year's day by the old calendar). According to Christian tradition, it is associated with the so-called dirty days between Christmas and Epiphany when evil spirits were thought to be active and dangerous. Despite the links to Christian holidays, mumming traditions are pre-Christian and only tangentially influenced by Christianity.

Mumming practices have followed a trajectory similar to that Gail Kligman (1981) described for *căluş* rituals in Romania, including a transition from supernatural enactment, to a form of local resistance under early communist repression, to folkloric revival as national culture in late socialism. Currently, their sheer entertainment value seems to dominate. These "stages," however, fail to eclipse one another and the history of the ritual becomes part of its current resonance. For example, supernatural expectations continue to be significant even though many people deny belief. Even in the strictly performative context of folklore festivals members of the audience often ask mummers to dance with small children. For believers this insures a child's health, but the skeptical may tacitly acquire the same benefit in the guise of entertaining their child. Moreover, the hope that mummers might bring an amorphous luck is widespread among villagers, and research in 2002 elicited an increase of espoused belief in mumming's supernatural efficacy (compared to the 1980s and 1990s).

The short period of communist repression in the 1950s enhanced the value of mumming for villagers in the postcommunist context and may have contributed to its survival into the 21st century. Villagers point to contemporary enactments as evidence of their past resistance to communist control, which carries significant symbolic capital in a postcommunist country with little history of socialist dissent. The mumming festivals, organized by the socialist state in an effort to convert "archaic" beliefs into folkloric performances of nationalist value, failed to displace village activities and actually helped sustain them. In its effort to homogenize folk practice, the socialist state sanctioned a very narrow model of ritual, which ultimately could not compete with the richness and meaning of local traditions (see Silverman 1983, 1989). Villagers typically incorporated state-sanctioned elements into local traditions but schemed to evade any restrictions on the latter (Buchanan 1996). Thus, the state's involvement with mumming first granted it meaning as resistance through prohibition, then facilitated its continuity through state-sponsored festivals, which sustained divergent village practices. Mumming thus supported and challenged the state simultaneously. A similar relationship continues in the postsocialist context with festivals now organized by municipalities and underwritten by local private enterprises, as well as the European Federation of Carnival Cities. By participating, mummers create a picture of cultural vitality that masks rather desperate economic conditions and attracts tourists, but their enactments also continue a protest against the uniform hegemonic modern project, now in its capitalist guise.

Bulgarian mumming events are usually day-long affairs and may span several days. Time compression of the ritual is one of the principal changes over the last 50 years, primarily in response to the less flexible work schedules accompanying industrialization and state control. The profile of participants has also changed. Traditionally all mummers were bachelors. While young men continue to predominate in contemporary practice, middle-aged men, children, and a growing number of women now participate. Participants can be grouped into a few distinct categories. The most spectacular figures are masked creatures whose costumes run a gamut from natural animal skins and synthetic imitations to variations on traditional folk costume. Their masks also vary from the ornate to the

FIGURE 1. New Year's mummers from the region of Blagoevgrad, (southwestern Bulgaria), at the biannual festival of "Masquerade Games" in Pernik (1998). (Photo by Dimitur Dobrev)

animalistic. Many are constructed on wooden frames, some taller than the participants who wear them, covered with fabric, trinkets, animal skins, horns, feathers, and even whole stuffed animals and birds (see Figures 1–3). These mummers wear bells around their torso of the type usually hung around the necks of livestock. The number of bells varies inversely with the size—either a few very large ones made especially for the purpose (Figure 2) or 30–40 smaller bells (Figure 3). The collection can be extremely heavy, especially on a day-long trek around the village with constant running and jumping to produce the deafening noise that signals the mummers' approach and helps drive away evil.

While these figures are the most spectacular, the second category of figures is actually more important. It centers on a transvestite figure, usually referred to as a "bride" or "virgin," and her escort, commonly called a "groom" or "fiancé" (Figures 4 and 6). This group might also include a "priest" and other wedding participants such as in-laws and godparents. They are usually accompanied by musicians—at least a drummer, but, perhaps, other instruments, if available (Figure 4).

The third category of participants includes villagers dressed as "gypsies," or sometimes more generic "darkies,"

who might also be marked as Middle Eastern (Figure 5). This is a disturbing element of the ritual for anyone with political sensitivities and testimony to the lack thereof on the part of most participants and observers. The actors are usually younger teenagers and adolescents who dress in rags and blacken their faces with soot, embodying and performing the negative stereotypes of the Roma or generic, dark "other."[4]

A fourth group of mummers includes costumed couples which operate somewhat independently, usually either a "gypsy" with a dancing bear, or a camel driver and his camel (parallel to the Christmas bull and hobby horse figures in English/Welsh mumming; see Halpert 1969:45). In some traditions the camel dies and is brought back to life as a promise of spring renewal, or the bear attacks and wrestles members of the household to ensure good fortune. A number of burlesque figures such as men dressed as overly buxom women, doctors, and nurses might be found among other groups, or roaming on their own, performing lewd acts and enhancing the carnival quality of the event.

Survakari rituals begin in the evening with the lighting of a big bonfire on the village square. Villagers watch as survakari circle the fire in rhythmic steps. Fires are left

FIGURE 2. New Year's mummers from the region of Breznik (west-central Bulgaria) at the Pernik festival in 2002.

to burn out overnight and might provide the soot for the gypsy figures the following day. As with kukeri, the main activities commense in the morning with a gathering of village participants, either at the village square or the house of an organizer where masks are stored. Mummers begin by dancing around the square and then set off to canvass the village. En route, the masked figures jump and dance to simple rhythms periodically culminating in a frenetic free-for-all of jumping and noise.

Mummers visit each village house, entering the yard through the ubiquitous gate and calling out the residents, whom they bless with various invocations for wealth, fertility, and agricultural abundance. They might also perform some element of wedding ritual, throw household items around the yard, or instigate "fights" with the men of the house, hitting and pinching them to drive out evil and ensure good fortune. The "priest" blesses residents with excessive amounts of "holy water." A circular folk dance is often required and phallic elements carried by the mummers, such as wooden swords or staffs, are wielded prominently. The hosts join in and participate according to their own proclivities: Some are very active participants, others just passive recipients of blessings. Mummers are rewarded with food and drink, usually homemade wine or brandy. They also receive other gifts from the household's

agricultural production, such as flour, beans, wool, potatoes, or eggs. The most important gift is money: It is usually given to the female/bride figure but also may be distributed among other figures, notably the priest, the tzar figure, and the musicians. "Gypsies" beg for more and may or may not get it. The money is pooled and usually expended on a collective banquet. Mummers might also contribute to some village need, or use it to finance ritual expenses, such as travel costs to mumming festivals. Many hosts offer additional libation for the mummers to take with them. With the help of food and drink the group gets progressively more festive and the atmosphere is infectious.

After visiting the village homes, mummers might disperse or join others in the village tavern. In some cases there is a final gathering of music, dancing, and noise making at the square, perhaps with competitions for best costumes between individuals or groups if the village has more than one mumming troop. Kukeri usually return to the square for a ritual enactment of the agricultural cycle. Masked men pull a wooden plow around the square, after which a plowman performs a pantomime sowing and harvesting of wheat (Figure 6). The container holding the seeds is then rolled across the square and whether it lands up or down foretells the future of the year's harvest. One of the figures, usually the bride, climbs atop the plow and

FIGURE 3. Pre-spring mummers in the village of Topolchane (east-central Bulgaria, 2002).

repeats the ritual blessings that have been invoked at each house, perhaps adding additional blessings and commentary. In the village of Turiya this finale was replaced by a ritual battle between the masked figures and the "darkies" culminating in a doll that had represented a new birth during the day's events being thrown into the village stream, provoking mummers to jump into the freezing water to save it.

This description highlights only a few of the variations, which are nearly as numerous as the ritual enactments. Variations actually multiply each year as particular figures disappear or take on new roles and new figures are added (perhaps borrowed from neighboring villages). Each event is a goldmine for symbolic analysis and the meanings of various elements have been explored by folklorist and ethnographers (e.g., Kraev 1996; Raichevski and Fol 1993; Stamenova 1982). Here I only wish to point out the qualities of community these rites convey.

BULGARIAN COMMUNITY

While the above description might easily fit into a Durkheimian model of ritual solidarity, the demonstrations of solidarity and goodwill are interwoven with contrary images. The very sequence of the ritual, which follows a pattern similar to many other calendric rituals, makes the re-

lationship clear. Masks and costumes transform ritual participants from members of potentially antagonistic village families into a village entity, often at the village square (itself a symbol of the village). They then move to household units, verifying their independence, incorporating them only individually, and in situ, into the collective celebration. Solidarity is demonstrated not by a collective village gathering but by the visit to each separate domestic space by a small subset of residents whose disguises embody the mythic, usually unseen, amorphous and potentially monstrous aspects of community.

The canvass of households also reveals evident conflicts. In some villages not all households are visited. A recent death in the family requires avoidance, but others who refuse to receive mummers are likely to be labeled stingy or unsocial. Often town residents with villas in the countryside watch the mummers go by with neither side initiating interaction, dramatizing the rural–urban tension so rife in Bulgaria. Ethnic tensions are demonstrated as Roma households are usually skipped, even when the mummers themselves include Roma. If Roma are visited, it is likely to be "assimilated" families. When mummers include Roma in their ranks, the reception of the mummers by Bulgarian hosts may include negative ethnic commentary or actions.

FIGURE 4. New Year's mummers, including the "bridal party" and musicians, in the village of Yardzhilovtsi (west-central Bulgaria, 1997).

In villages where every household is visited, not all hosts receive the mummers with equal enthusiasm. Some view mummers as petty extortionists who must be paid off to prevent them from reeking havoc on household property—a threat that was purportedly more real in the past. In these cases, the visit itself exudes resentment on the part of the host. Mummers are resentful when their hosts include a young man, which is read by some mummers as a refusal to join their ranks and, thus, a tacit criticism of their actions. In such cases even a warm reception includes potential conflict, demonstrated by physical abuse of the "offender" by the mummers. Reception may be enhanced by kin connections between participants and hosts, reminding the mummers that family has not been totally eclipsed by their ritual status. In fact, the ritual is most animated when members of the host family are also mummers, which threatens the symbolic division between mummers as representatives of the community and individual families. In such cases, the evident increase in conviviality is countered by more exaggerated enactments of conflict in the form of fighting, theft, and destructive behavior. These actions effectively reassert opposition in those cases where it is least structurally apparent.

It is also significant that the central figures of mumming are identified with family-based ritual roles. This is most explicit in the survakari wedding, but it is also evident in kukeri celebrations where the female is usually associated with either recent or impending marriage or recent childbirth. The family symbolism is further affirmed by the gifts handed over to the mummers, which are symbolic of dowry/wedding or christening gifts. So the mummers as *community* figures tap into the symbolism of *family* ritual to acquire community offerings: Apparently, the community can only be affirmed through the manipulation and use of the family.[5] I refer to these events as "metarituals" since they consciously reference and manipulate other rituals and, thereby, underline the centrality of the component at the same time they provide a different message. The fact that mummers depend on family rituals to affirm community relations encapsulates the kind of community they are affirming—one that is constituted in large measure by the distinctions and possible antagonisms between families.

Even at the collective finale the conflicts continue in the form of symbolic bride theft and physical skirmishes between mummers and onlookers. Theft or seduction of the central female figure is a leitmotif in most kukeri activities and some survakari practices. Throughout the mumming activities—whether at the square, en route between houses, or inside the courtyards of village houses—

FIGURE 5. Two "gypsy" figures collecting brandy during New Year's mumming in the west-central village of Cherna Gora (1998).

men who are not mumming try to steal the bride, or in more ribald practices have pantomime intercourse with her. When she is visiting their yard they try to get her into the house itself. Mummers are kept busy retrieving her. They take the job seriously and have been known to break doors and windows in the process. They always follow such efforts with a ritual flogging of the thief. The attempt to steal the female symbol of fertility and bounty is above all a representation of the selfishness and envy that separates village households—the desire to monopolize and keep all the largess she represents in one's own house. The kukeri are charged to prevent such efforts and to punish those who persist. While the lesson is clear, it is equally clear that no one takes it to heart and that attempts will continue. Perpetual enactments are not simply warnings against such attempts but a demonstration of how such selfishness is part and parcel of the village community. Moreover, people gain luck and fertility from the theft and short-term possession of the bride—despite the fact that they are ultimately thwarted. What appears to be a demonstration for the purpose of moral instruction is also a contribution to the ritual objective of household fertility and well-being. Theft is expected and has individual benefits, just as it does in the daily life of villagers (Creed 1998:197–200).

Perhaps the clearest demonstrations of opposition are the episodes of ritualized conflict. Mummers are fighters and often armed with symbolic weapons. Traditionally different mumming groups are believed to have even fought to the death and there are legends of kukeri graveyards where groups of kukeri were buried after deadly confrontations. For the most part these battles are perceived as conflicts between different villages, reinforcing the association of mumming with the village and supporting the idea of community solidarity against outsiders. But there are elements of ritualized battle and conflict within villages as well. The village of Yardzhilovtsi maintains two large survakari groups representing two different parts of the village and they are not allowed to cross into one another's territory. The culminating event at the ritual square is nothing but a competition between the two groups to see whose wedding is nicer, whose musicians play better, whose masks are more impressive, and, most importantly, who can make the most noise. Other villages have multiple mumming groups that overlap in territory, but the constitution of the groups still illustrate the vectors that divide the village, notably neighborhood, generation, and friendship. The village of Lesichevo in central Bulgaria has several groups of mummers organized primarily according to friendship, and the groups only visit

FIGURE 6. Pantomime plowing, led by transvestite bride, in the village of Kabile (east-central Bulgaria) during pre-spring mumming in 1988.

households where they have friends or relatives. Some houses might be visited by several groups, while others are not visited at all. Evidence of any village solidarity is limited to the village square after the canvass when all the groups join together and where conflict in the form of wrestling and fighting is the central activity.

Some mumming groups in Lesichevo include the figure of a traditional peasant with whom the masked figures fight constantly. In other words the conflict between mummers and hosts is here incorporated symbolically into the mumming performance itself—mumming has become a metaritual reflection of itself, underlining the centrality of the refracted theme of conflict. In the village of Turiya mummers carry wooden swords and greet each other with a patterned step that can best be described as a mixture of sword fight and mating dance, in which swords move between each others legs and culminate in a ritual shaving with the sword. Their mumming day culminates in the ritual battle between masked kukeri and the Arab-like "darkies" that could easily be viewed as a conflict between the community and "outsiders" were it not for the important and different role these figures played throughout the day. They are alternately both insiders and outsiders, as the costume of one "darkie" captured perfectly: a jacket with the name of the village written across the back, accompanied by a fez. The "bride" in this village is always

dressed in *shalvari* (baggy "Turkish" pants) and her escort is a "darkie."

Mumming events not only represent conflict; they also generate it. A common conflict is over the role individuals will portray. While there may be an unlimited number of masked figures and gypsies, other roles, such as the bride and members of her entourage, are limited. Sometimes no one wants to fill these roles and someone must be cajoled or forced to do so, at other times multiple individuals want to play the same role and someone must be denied. In either case conflicts may result. Mumming can generate conflicts between villagers who think they should lead the event, or between leaders and mummers over how heavy-handed leadership should be. Mummers or villagers may get angry with participants who are not performing their role adequately, especially at festivals in which they are judged as a group in competition for awards. Mock battles can escalate into real fighting when one combatant decides the other has crossed the line from horseplay into aggression. All these possibilities become more probable with more drinking, which is itself a possible bone of contention.

In many villages the event has lead to conflicts between the mummers and the secretary of the village "reading room" *(chitalishte)* who was officially responsible for village cultural activities during the socialist era. The

conflicts might be aesthetic or organizational, but they are usually financial. In many villages the secretary previously coordinated mumming activities and received part of the money collected to buy books or other cultural materials. Now that the secretary has few state resources or rewards to return to the mummers they have begun to insist on keeping the collected money for their own uses, which erodes the secretary's interest in the event. The declining role of this official has opened up new possibilities for organizational conflict between participants. Conflicts also emerge over ritual innovation with some villagers insisting on "traditional" practice and others embracing novelty. The traditionalists use the festivals and the expectations of the ethnographers who judge them as the justification for their concern with authenticity. They usually carry the day at festivals, but not in village practice where innovators are freer. Any of these conflicts can escalate to the point of group division leading to two antagonistic mumming groups, as in the village of Sinitevo, but more often they end with a disgruntled individual or group refusing to participate. Such conflict, of course, is not always solely about mumming, which provides a convenient vehicle for expressing other ongoing tensions in the village.

The conflicts evident in Bulgarian mumming by no means eclipse its collective character, and while themes of conflict may predominate in some villages, in many cases the communal nature of the ritual is overwhelming. Still, the interpretations pursued here suggest that mumming does far more than simply reinforce the village unit; it verifies, affirms, and even produces the very contradictions and oppositions it seems to redress.

A BALKAN EXCEPTION

In bringing together conflict and cohesion Bulgarian mumming represents village relations in a way social scientific categories cannot easily express. This is not a case of anti-structure (Turner 1969), reversal (Bakhtin 1968), or catharsis (Gluckman 1963), but, rather, a ritual in which the contradictions and reversals of everyday life are given ritual expression. In a sense Bulgarian mumming achieves the contradictory combination of meaning and symbolism that Sider (1986:92) suggests distinguishes mumming from scoffing in Newfoundland. He sees mumming as expressing the alliances between families, while scoffing—the theft of food from covillagers for a ritual feast—expresses the antagonisms. In Bulgaria mumming takes on both tasks and in so doing highlights the intricate interweaving of these two forces in Bulgarian village life. In Handelman's (1990) typology of public events, then, Bulgarian mumming is not just an event of "re-presentation" (based on the interplay of multiple possibilities though inversion), as he categorizes Newfoundland mumming, but also an event that "models" the world (by promoting fertility and prosperity) and "presents" the lived-in world (by showing the conflicts of community life). These various

roles help explain why mumming is such a fecund source for sociocultural insights. While Handelman acknowledges that single events can perform all three roles, he does not suggest it occurs with mumming. This may reflect differences between Newfoundland and Bulgaria, but it may also stem from the tendency to approach radically nonnormative enactments as inversions rather than dramatic statements about the ordinary. Meanwhile, our tendency to see them as nonnormative to start with may stem from a romantic image of community in which consensus and harmony, rather than conflict and contention, are definitive.

The dangers of romanticism are not restricted to Eastern Europe or even social scientific analysis; they exist wherever the notion of community is deployed. The search for a romantic community can easily lead to social fragmentation or violence as people strive for associations that are harmonious, uniform, and cohesive. This dynamic may account for the continuing fragmentation and attendant political evisceration of communities defined by identity vectors such as ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation. Conflicts within these groups take on added consequence if the group is perceived as a "community" of consensus and cooperation, in which case disputes require division. This division and conflict may provoke calls for community revival, which generate even more divisions in a vicious positive feedback loop. Breaking the cycle requires that we first interrogate the underlying ideas of community that drive such actions.

The documentation of an alternative view of community in rural Bulgaria brings me to the contentious claim with which I began. The possibility that rural Bulgarians have a notion of community that is based on conflict may account for the lack of extreme xenophobic and virulent nationalism in this multiethnic country. Since the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis Bulgaria has been touted internationally as an "oasis of stability" in the Balkans. This distinction deflects attention from the severe economic difficulties that have devastated much of the country since 1989, and the significant racism and nationalism that saturate political discourse and everyday interactions. Still, it does reflect a distinctiveness that I have noticed ethnographically. In numerous villages I have noted a particular form of racist discourse regarding Roma that is derogatory yet inclusive. Villagers complain about the Roma yet recognize and envy their abilities and talents. This is captured in the common expression: "Nice work, but it's gypsy." This may not seem distinct from run-of-the-mill racism, but such comments are often accompanied by inclusive recognition of Roma as part of the village communities where they live. Roma in the village will often be referred to as "our" Roma, in distinction to outsiders.[6] While there is resentment about slough, theft, and begging, Bulgarians are quick to engage Roma for work when needed and are often generous when Roma ask for assistance with food or money. This is not to deny the terrible oppression visited on the Roma by the Bulgarian socialist state, which

forced them to settle and assimilate (Silverman 1996), the success of which probably inspired subsequent efforts against the Turkish population (Bates 1994; Creed 1990). I do suggest, however, that these state policies did not perfectly reflect the more ambiguous sentiments of many Bulgarians towards Roma, which may be linked to their understandings of community.

These sentiments are demonstrated in mumming activities. In villages where Roma live, the "gypsy" figures in mumming are ritually complex. They define a separate ritual group and both their distinctiveness and their marginality are graphically emphasized, yet they are elemental to the activity at hand. Those who portray them indulge in the most offensive stereotypes but their very ritual presence and importance verifies Roma inclusion within the village community. Indeed, their sharing of food and appeal for money at each house is based on village cultural obligations to provide for Roma, even though Bulgarian villagers might resent it. In some villages, Roma participate in mumming, and in a few villages around the city of Sliven, they actually predominate. In addition to the typical role of musician they also perform as masked mummers, sometimes with costumes borrowed from ethnic Bulgarians. I heard one report of a young Roma performing the role of "gypsy" at a mumming festival (Manova 2002). To gauge from the profile of observers, Roma clearly enjoy the rituals. None expressed any sense of insult and most dismissed my effort to point it out. Ethnic Bulgarians often complained about excessive Roma participation but then expressed gratitude to the Roma for sustaining an endangered local tradition. A notion of community in which conflict is part of its very constitution easily accommodates such ambiguity. Ethnic antagonism is not anathema to community where community linkages between co-nationals are also relations of conflict and tension. The gypsy component in mumming testifies to a community that is unavoidably diverse and antagonistic as well as unequal. The challenge is to find ways to redress the unequal relations between community members without destroying the inclusiveness that the notion of "community-through-conflict" facilitates. Increases in anti-Roma violence and discrimination since 1989 do not augur success in this endeavor.

Turks do not "enjoy" the same ambivalence as Roma. Their otherness is reinforced by close association with another nation-state (Turkey), greater geographical segregation (most live in predominantly Turkish settlements and regions), and a history of political domination over Bulgarians (five centuries of Ottoman control). Consequently, I found no evidence of Turkish participation in mumming activities. In addition, explicitly Turkish figures in mumming, usually Ottoman soldiers who reenacted historical events, exhibited no evidence of the ambiguity that qualified "gypsy" characters. Still, during fieldwork in the 1980s I heard almost no support for the state's infamous assimilation campaign against the Turks, and numerous villagers actually confided their disgust and distaste for

such actions. The subsequent prospect of democratization made many Bulgarians living in heavily Turkish areas anxious about their future and generated anti-Turkish sentiments (Creed 1990). Nonetheless, compared to other examples, Bulgarian variants of nationalism seem to include muted forms that fail to displace robust individualistic, familial, and village alliances, while actually expecting a degree of inevitable conflict. This quality is perhaps detectable in the country's much-touted refusal to deport Jews during its alliance with Germany in World War II (Chary 1972; Todorov 2001). It is also evident in the general lack of interest on the part of Bulgarians abroad in establishing ethnic associations, which stands in stark contrast to the actions of immigrant populations from other parts of the Balkans. I believe Bulgarian mumming not only reflects such an understanding of community/nation but also reproduces it. As locally differentiated and identified rituals, mumming practices deny the homogenizing imperative of a nationalizing state. Moreover, the message they convey is that conflict need not be centrifugal. Together these qualities restrain nationalistic tendencies and forestall the "descent into dementia."[7]

Proving that different notions of community lead to different consequences in "imagined" forms would require an extended comparative analysis of neighboring countries regarding notions of collectivity. Because other researchers have not addressed community directly in their research, the extrapolations required at this point would invalidate any conclusions. Still, it is worth noting that village-based mumming rituals are less extensive in other parts of the Balkans. Where they are practiced, the connection to Christianity is more significant (Cowan 1992; Supek 1982), perhaps reflecting and constituting a more sectarian notion of community. Moreover, Robert Hayden (1996) demonstrates that the conflicts in Yugoslavia followed constitutional processes that made heterogenous communities unimaginable (i.e., that perhaps changed notions of community). Beyond the Balkans, anthropological contributions to the study of nationalism have alerted us to some very particular qualities of national attachments, which might reflect unique notions of community (Munasinghe 2002). This model also accommodates different variants of nationalism within a nation based on divergent images of community among different sectors of the population (Dobrescu 2003).

Of course the inverse must also be entertained. Is it possible that the romantic community inherent in the model of nationalism described by Anderson (1991) can reshape local notions of community when that model is adopted by a state or installed by international forces? Put another way, do European images of nationalism create romantic expectations of community or do different notions of community generate different nationalisms? There is no escaping the romantic community of European nationalism. Whether this tradition actually began in the colonies (as Anderson suggests), or in Europe itself, it saturates the global consensus about what constitutes a

nation. This dominance explains why Anderson could not imagine multiple images of community. However, where local alternatives exist, people may also envision a different type of nation. They may work politically to install these qualities at the state level or simply propel them onto the national stage through everyday interactions and spectacular enactments such as mumming. On the state level alternative images of the nation contend: Perhaps with shifting fortunes, perhaps with one vanquishing alternatives, or, perhaps, with multiple versions producing new hybrids. To even see these processes we must first recognize the local notions of community that inform different national imaginings.

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GERALD W. CREED Department of Anthropology, Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY 10021

NOTES

1. See Amit 2002 for a recent exception.

2. This trend is most explicit in cultural anthropology, but it is also evident in linguistics (Johnston 1990), archeology (Canuto and Yaeger 2000), and biological anthropology (Fleagle et al. 1999).

3. This literal reading focuses attention on the structural elements of enactment rather than the experience of performance and does not attend to the voices of participants. I believe the latter support my interpretation, but space limitations do not allow their inclusion here.

4. Blackface was central to Philadelphia mumming traditions as well but was replaced with gold paint/makeup with increasing racial sensitivity.

5. Interestingly, the mumming tradition of Belsnickels reported from German communities in North America in the 19th century also centered on a family group, including a husband, transvestite wife, and child (Cline 1958).

6. "Our" is commonly used in Bulgarian to signal collective inclusion, *not* ownership.

7. Several anthropologists (esp. Herzfeld 2003) have explored how the quintessentially local quality of folklore comes to serve primarily nationalist agendas and identities. This has happened in Bulgaria as well, but as previously noted, the state failed to fully co-opt local distinctions and meanings. This is especially true for rituals such as mumming that continue to be performed locally and are not defined solely by the national domain of folk festivals.

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