

BULGARIANS IN MOROCCO – CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SOCIOCULTURAL INTERACTION

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Abstract: The article focuses on migration and cultural heritage. It presents the processes of transmission and use of Bulgarian cultural heritage abroad. The study outlines the sociocultural interaction between the Bulgarian community in Morocco and the host society. The Bulgarian migrant community established in Morocco's Kingdom mainly during the 1960s–1980s consisted mostly of professionals: hydro- and civil engineers, geologists, teachers, and architects. Their well-done work contributed to the excellent image of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarians in the receiving country are also present nowadays. At the same time, cases of Bulgarian immigration in Morocco due to mixed marriages could be observed. Although the Bulgarian community in this Maghreb country is not numerous (around 350–400 people), it is visible with a rich cultural calendar that includes sociocultural initiatives in the interaction with the host society. The Bulgarian migrants in Morocco do not have a formal organization. Meanwhile their community is proactive and consolidated around the Bulgarian Embassy. The Bulgarian school in various formats has been operating since 1986. A folk dance group was established in 2018. The paper attempts to answer why knowledge of Bulgarian traditions, folklore, history, and preservation of the Bulgarian language and cultural identity are important for the Bulgarian community in Morocco.

Keywords: Bulgarian school abroad, cultural heritage, institution, migration, sociocultural interaction

Introduction

In 1956, Morocco regained its independence and soon established diplomatic relations with Bulgaria. According to the economic agreement between the two countries, Bulgaria sent different professionals to Morocco. That's why the Bulgarian migrant community established in the Kingdom of Morocco (mainly during the 1960s–1980s) consisted mostly of hydro- and civil engineers, geologists, teachers, architects, and doctors. Their well-done work contributed to the good image of Bulgaria, and the Bulgarians in the receiving country are also present nowadays. Some of these specialists settled in this north-west African country with their families. Therefore, it can be summarized that the Bulgarian migration in Morocco is mainly of professional nature, economical for reasons and mainly family in composition. At the same time, cases of Bulgarian immigration to Morocco due to mixed marriages could be observed.¹ After the political changes in Bulgaria in 1989, there was no increase in emigration to Morocco, and today, the Bulgarian migrants in the kingdom, according to unofficial data, number about 350–400 people.² This little community is concentrated mainly in the capital Rabat and the city of Casablanca, as well as in Tangier, Mohammedia, and Temara.

Cultural heritage and migration

The Bulgarian cultural heritage abroad is an object of numerous researches about Bulgarian migrant communities in Europe and the USA.³ This article, too, focuses on migration and cultural heritage, but it presents the processes of transmission and use of Bulgarian cultural heritage outside of Europe – in an African, non-Christian country. The present study's task is to determine the role and significance of the cultural heritage for the Bulgarian community in Morocco. The research focus also includes sociocultural interaction with the host country. For this study's purposes, the active elements of the cultural heritage are analyzed through the activities of the Bulgarian consolidation forms in Morocco.

Cultural heritage, seen as a social and political construct, includes cultural expressions inherited from the past, reflecting and validating our identity as a nation, community, family, or individual, and deserving respect and preserva-

tion (Logan & Smith 2009: XII). It is through inheritance that the significant past fits into the present (Ganeva-Raicheva et al. 2012: 6). The cultural heritage that Bulgarian migrants have inherited from their home country and which they transmit, maintain, construct, and popularize in the host society includes elements such as language, festivity, literature, folklore, rituals, orthodoxy, music, dances, and so on (Gergova 2017).

As for the relations “cultural heritage – migrant community”, on the one hand, the cultural heritage unites the migrant community, but on the other, the cultural heritage legitimizes the latter in the host society. The maintaining, presenting and transmitting cultural heritage abroad depend on the reasons for migration, the existence of a relatively consolidated and organized migrant community, and the policies of the sending and the receiving countries. The degree of adaptation and integration in the host society also influences the need to state and show one’s cultural identity (Elchinova 2010). The cultural heritage is the basis of the cultural identity, which in the conditions of migration is characterized by dialogical formation, combining the sending and receiving society’s cultural specifics. This heritage is concurrently a reason for and a result of migrant consolidation in formal and informal unions. The connection with Bulgaria and the Bulgarian cultural heritage is maintained not only through the Bulgarian events, festive calendar, literature, language, and the possibilities of internet connection but also through the annual summer returns to the homeland.

In the Maghreb, as the southernmost part of the Mediterranean and the closest part of the African continent to Europe, traditional local cultures, Islam, and European cultural influences intertwine and interact. The official languages in the Kingdom of Morocco are Arabic and Berber; the diplomatic language is French; in the areas under the Spanish protectorate, Spanish is spoken; and in business communication, English dominates. In such a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual environment, the Bulgarian migrant community represents, transmits, and promotes the Bulgarian cultural heritage. The Bulgarian migrants in Europe and North America, for example, live in a cultural environment similar to their own, with dominant values of Western civilization and Christian religion. These features facilitate the process of the migrants’ adaptation and transmission of cultural heritage. The local context in Morocco is different: Asian, African, and European cultural influences intertwine there, and a leading religion is Islam. As a result, these differences

make the migrants' adaptation and children's training in Bulgarian cultural heritage more time- and energy-consuming. At the same time, the fact that Bulgarian culture is unknown and attractive to the local people is one of the reasons Bulgarian cultural events in Morocco are attended by Moroccans. The professional trajectories of the migrant community are also specific. A significant difference between the Bulgarian migrants in Western Europe and North America and those in the Kingdom of Morocco is that the Bulgarian higher education is recognised in Morocco, and the Bulgarian specialists in the Maghreb country do not have to take equivalency exams to practice their professions, which facilitates their career development.

The study results from fieldwork conducted in the Kingdom of Morocco in December 2019,⁴ using the methods of semistructured interview, observation, archival research, and analysis of publications in social networks.

Although the Bulgarian migrants in Morocco do not have a formal organization, the community is proactive and consolidated around the Bulgarian Embassy. Two small but important migrant organizations function in the embassy building, aimed at children and folklore dances lovers: a school and a folklore dance ensemble. As for the formal/informal union distinction, a definition of the informal associates it with the unstructured and the normatively non-fixed, while the formal is considered mainly as an activity of official policies and is normatively fixed (Lauth 2004: 6; Ostrom 2006; Grzymala-Busse 2004; Voskresenski n.d.). In this aspect, the Bulgarian schools abroad are located between formality and informality: they are formal insofar as they are registered in Bulgaria and the host country, and informal insofar as they offer additional education one day a week (Gergova & Borisova 2021). Children of Bulgarian origin are educated in a Bulgarian school with two branches – in Rabat and Casablanca. A beneficiary of the school is the Bulgarian Embassy. As for the folklore dance group “Hortse”, it is an informal consolidation union.

Moroccan citizens who have graduated from higher education in Bulgaria or have worked for a long time in our country and maintain contacts with Bulgaria⁵ also gravitate towards the Bulgarian community. They are welcome at all Bulgarian events: celebrations, concerts, and holidays. Most of them speak fluent Bulgarian.⁶

The Bulgarian school⁷

The Bulgarian school in Morocco has been functioning since the 1986/87⁸ school year. The migrant community itself established it. Bulgarian schools abroad function parallel to the local education system and offer additional education. They are voluntary and offer classes once a week, usually on one of the holidays. Since 2009, the Bulgarian schools abroad have been funded by the Bulgarian state (Kulov & Borisova 2017). Since 2011, the Bulgarian school in Morocco has had “Rodolyubie” as a name (the name means ‘Patriotism’), which meaning is also related to the cultural heritage. The school functions in two branches: in the Bulgarian Embassy in Rabat and in the Bulgarian diplomatic agency in Casablanca. The school educates children from the age of four (carries out preschool educational activities) and students from the first class to their twelfth (equivalent to the so-called senior year). Our respondents shared that every Bulgarian child in Morocco attends the “Rodolyubie” school. The school principal, Ani Radeva, says that some of the children travel from other cities, over long distances, to visit the Bulgarian school, which is indicative of the interest in this institution.

Preschool education is necessary because many of the children come from mixed marriages and are born in Morocco, so Bulgarian is a mother tongue, not a native language, and in most cases is not the preferred language for family communication (Matanova & Borissova 2021). The ability to communicate in Bulgarian is a priority of the Bulgarian school,⁹ because it is the key to master the other elements of cultural heritage. Children in the Bulgarian school and the students in the other schools abroad study Bulgarian language and Bulgarian literature, history and civilization, geography and economics of Bulgaria and have extracurricular activities to keep their cultural identity. Children and parents take part in workshops and together they make *martenitsi* (traditional white and red amulets for 1 March), Christmas cards, and miniature models of Bulgarian cultural and historical objects.¹⁰

The Bulgarian school abroad consolidates the Bulgarian community in the receiving country, and the school festivals become festivals of the whole community (Borisova & Kulov 2017). This process is strengthened by the fact that the embassy and the school function under one roof in Rabat. The Bulgarian

school in Morocco is especially important as an educational centre and incubator for cultural heritage, as well as a consolidating core for the small Bulgarian community in the kingdom. The Opening of the School Year, the National Holiday 3 March, 24 May (the Day of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, of the Bulgarian Alphabet, Education and Culture and of Slavonic Literature) gather children, parents, embassy diplomats, representatives of the Bulgarian community not related to the school, and Moroccan guests. The Christmas concert we attended in 2019 gathered Bulgarian migrants from all over Morocco in the embassy. It became a community festival with carol songs and blessings, the dance of the snowflakes, poems, gifts from Santa Claus (Fig. 1), Bulgarian folklore dances, and traditional dishes. The Bulgarian school students take part in the diplomatic reception on 3 March, the National Holiday, which is another way of popularizing the Bulgarian cultural heritage. The school and the embassy function together by supporting each other.



Figure 1. The school Christmas concert. Rabat, December 2019. Photograph by Mariyanka Borisova Zhekova. FtAIF 1840, photo 29.

In pandemic conditions, Bulgarian school education was carried out remotely, as the online connection offers new opportunities. For the Enlightenment Leaders Day (1 November) in 2020, under the teachers' guidance, students prepared and recorded videos with their performances of poems and songs dedicated to the Enlightenment Leaders and Bulgaria. The videos have been uploaded

on the Facebook page of the Bulgarian Embassy in Morocco. The students of the Bulgarian school “Rodolyubie” celebrate in videoconference together with students from the Bulgarian school “Ran Bosilek” in Gütersloh, Germany.¹¹ The workshops for Christmas cards in 2020 were also held online, as the cards are photographed and posted on the Bulgarian Embassy’s Facebook page. Thus, the Bulgarian holiday calendar is maintained among the children of Bulgarian origin. At the same time, the tradition of making the results of the education of the children in the Bulgarian school available to the Bulgarian community in the Maghreb country is preserved. The children from the Bulgarian school in Morocco commemorate online the Day of the death of the national hero Vasil Levski (19 February) through recitals and drawings dedicated to the Apostle of Freedom, as well as through a virtual meeting at the National Museum “Vasil Levski” in the town of Karlovo (where the hero was born).

Bulgarian school “Rodolyubie” in Morocco follows the models of the Bulgarian schools abroad to preserve, construct, transmit, and valorize the Bulgarian cultural heritage in its various manifestations – language, literature, folklore, music, dances, traditions, and skills – and to consolidate the Bulgarian community in the respective host country. Particular emphasis is placed on the spoken mastery of the Bulgarian language. The teaching staff appreciates the cooperation of a series of ambassadors who have contributed to the prosperity of the Bulgarian school in the Kingdom of Morocco, as well as the parents and children for their diligence and dedication. The school’s holiday calendar traditionally becomes a holiday calendar of the Bulgarian community in the Maghreb country. The preservation, transmission, and manifestation of the Bulgarian cultural heritage in Morocco, analysed through the example of the school, are important for different generations of migrants in different ways. If in its first years the Bulgarian school educated children living with their Bulgarian parents in Morocco, today’s students are mostly children from mixed marriages and were born in the kingdom. Transnationalism is a suitable theory for understanding the current situation of the Bulgarian school in Morocco, opening a horizon for complex identities, loyalties, and commitment (Krasteva 2014: 146).

Folklore dance ensemble¹² “Hortse”¹³

The folklore dance ensemble “Hortse” was established in 2018 by enthusiastic Bulgarian women to maintain social contacts, tone, relaxing, and performances. The rehearsals happen once a week in the building of the Bulgarian Embassy (Fig. 2). The ensemble leader is Eugenia Nikitina-Spiridonova, who has lived in Morocco for the last 35 years. Apart from folklore dances, she also occupies herself with ballet and is the founder of a prestigious academy for a classical ballet called “Artemesia Club” in Rabat¹⁴. Another participant of the folklore ensemble “Hortse” is Tatyana Trifonova, a Bulgarian jazz singer famous in Morocco. In the ensemble, she sings and dances. The ensemble participates in different Bulgarian initiatives.



Figure 2. Folklore dance ensemble “Hortse”. Rabat, December 2019. Photograph by Mariyanka Borisova Zhekova. FtAIF 1840, photo 275.

While the “Rodolyubie” school focuses on Bulgarian language, history, folklore, and literature, the folklore dance ensemble emphasizes dance folklore. In addition, both organizations maintain and promote the Bulgarian cultural

heritage within the very migrant community and in front of different audiences in the host country. The Bulgarian school “Rodolyubie” and the folklore dance ensemble “Hortse” fit into the model we have observed in Bulgarian migrant institutions in Europe and the United States, namely: the most popular migrant consolidation forms are the school aimed at children and the folk dance group aimed at adults. At the same time, there is a specific attachment of these migrant consolidation forms to the official Bulgarian representation in the north-west African country. There are rare cases when a Bulgarian school abroad is housed in an embassy (Rabat, London), a consulate (until 2012, two Bulgarian schools were housed in the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in New York), or the Bulgarian Cultural Center (Rome).

Sociocultural interactions

The sociocultural interactions between Bulgaria and the Kingdom of Morocco stimulate the mutual knowledge of the two cultures, strengthen the relations between the two countries, and create conditions for fruitful cooperation in the cultural, economic, and social spheres. At the core of the sociocultural interactions, initiated by the Bulgarian side, is the cultural heritage as a resource both of the official Bulgarian state representation in Morocco and the migrant consolidation forms in the Maghreb country. Another specific feature of cultural heritage is its function to integrate into the receiving culture by establishing a positive image. Even if the Bulgarian community in this Maghreb country is not numerous, it is visible with a rich cultural calendar that includes sociocultural initiatives interacting with the host society.

The art installation

The art installation “The Bulgarian Letters” is a traveling exhibition of the Read Sofia Foundation. It represents colorful benches in the shape of Cyrillic letters, placed in 2019 by the yacht harbor in the city of Sale, which is next to Rabat (the Bow Regreg River separates Sale from Rabat). This initiative, managed by the Bulgarian Embassy, is a stage of a project called “The Hidden Letters” which creates new places for reading and meeting in the open air in the city environment (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Opening of the art installation “The Bulgarian letters”. Sale, December 2019. Photograph by Mariyanka Borisova Zhekova. FtAIF 1840, photo 197.

The exposition contains some letters of the Cyrillic alphabet that do not have a Latin or Greek equivalent (Б, З, П, Ш, Ж, Ч, Ц, Г, И, Ъ). The Cyrillic alphabet is the third official alphabet in the European Union, and this project aims to popularize it. In 2018, this art installation took place for the first time in Sofia. In 2019, it was presented in Paris and Sale, and in 2020, in Berlin and Budapest. The art installation in Sale is the first exposition of the project outside of Europe and is being accepted warmly by the Bulgarian community and the locals. In Morocco, where the people use Arabic, Berber, and Latin alphabets, the Cyrillic letters provoke curiosity and interest. The location of the art installation in an open-air public space (a yacht harbor) is aimed not only at promoting the Cyrillic script in the Moroccan environment but also at strengthening bilateral cultural and economic contacts. The designer of the letter-benches in Sale is a Bulgarian, and the producer is a Moroccan company, whose representatives were guests at the opening of the art installation in December 2019. On the occasion of Enlightenment Leaders Day in 2020, the Bulgarian Embassy organized a virtual flashmob urging Bulgarian citizens in Morocco to take photos with the letter benches at the Sale’s marina and send them to the embassy, accompanied by a quatrain of a beloved Bulgarian poet. The ambassador’s family is also involved in the initiative. Through this initiative, “The Hidden Letters”

not only emerge as a favorite meeting place for Bulgarians and Moroccans, but they are also revived and promoted in a new and unexpected way.

The Diplomatic Bazaar

The Diplomatic Bazaar occurs annually in Rabat at the end of the year and is organized by the Diplomatic Women's Club (International Women's Club), which includes women ambassadors and ambassadors' wives. This organization runs charity campaigns and supports social projects. In 2019, the bazaar incomes were aimed at funding projects of Moroccan NGOs helping women and children in Morocco. The king of Morocco also supports the Diplomatic Bazaar. Embassies, NGOs, and companies take part in the bazaar. Bulgarian companies offer products made of rose oil. The Bulgarian school joins in with Christmas decorations and cards made by the children (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The Bulgarian stand at the Diplomatic Bazaar. December 2019, Rabat. Photograph by The Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria in the Kingdom of Morocco. Source: <https://www.mfa.bg/upload/46451/rabat4.jpg>.

In 2019, for the first time, Bulgaria took part in the cultural program along with the bazaar. The folklore ensemble “Hortse” presents traditional folklore

dances. Bulgaria also participates in the international culinary stand with *banitsi* (traditional Bulgarian pastry) and Christmas cakes. In 2019, the highest income in the history of Bulgarian participation in the Diplomatic Bazaar was collected. The reaction of the Bulgarian ambassador about the support of the Bulgarian community and teamwork is favorable.

Conclusions

Bulgarian cultural heritage and sociocultural interaction with the receiving country could be observed through the case of two migrant organizations and two official events in Morocco. The Bulgarian school and the folklore dance ensemble were created by the very migrant community to practice, keep, and transmit Bulgarian cultural heritage.

At the same time, they are located in the Bulgarian Embassy and are supported by it. This assistance is mutual. The Bulgarian school and the ensemble “Hortse” take part in a number of embassy initiatives. When it comes to socio-cultural interactions with the receiving country, their initiator is the Bulgarian Embassy as a Bulgarian official in Morocco. Initiatives such as “The Bulgarian Letters” and participation in the Diplomatic Bazaar popularize the Bulgarian culture in the receiving society and have social dimensions. Through publicity, the Bulgarian migrant community creates its own image, presents itself, and communicates with the host society. The Bulgarian migrant organizations and the Bulgarian Embassy work together and rotate roles as initiators or mediators in popularizing the Bulgarian cultural heritage. This cooperation makes Bulgaria more visible and recognizable by the receiving country and helps keep its positive image.

There is a close connection between the official Bulgarian institutions in Morocco: the embassy and consulate, on the one hand, and the Bulgarian school with two branches (Rabat and Casablanca) and folklore dance group “Hortse”, on the other. Probably, due to the small size of the Bulgarian community in the Maghreb country, it seeks support and legitimacy through the official Bulgarian institutions in Morocco.

Although the Kingdom of Morocco is located in North Africa and its proximity to Europe has its influence, the border is significant in terms of spatio-temporal parameters (water barrier – Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean

Sea; time difference). This border is overcome mentally (through the Bulgarian language, festivities, rituals, music, and dancing) and physically (through annual returns to Bulgaria during the summer).

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Notes

¹ As a result of students' interstate exchange, a number of young Moroccan people completed their higher education in Bulgaria and subsequently returned to Morocco with their Bulgarian wives. Moroccan students in Bulgaria: "Since the 1970s, Moroccan students have been studying in Bulgaria. Before – medicine, now – engineering is the focus of their interest" (interview with Ambassador Yuri Shterk – National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Phono-archives FnAIF 3077, file 1. December 2019. Recorded by: Tanya Matanova, Mariyanka Borisova. For the Bulgarian students in Morocco – see Central State Archives of Bulgaria, fund 1477, inventory 20, archive unit 1678.

² See interview with Ambassador Yuri Shterk – National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Phono-archives FnAIF 3077, file 1.

³ For example, Penchev et al. 2017; Gergova & Matanova 2017; Borisova & Gergova 2017; Maeva 2017; Iankova 2014; Maeva & Zakhova 2013; Ganeva-Raicheva et al. 2012; Elchinova 2010; Ganeva-Raicheva 2004.

⁴ The field research was carried out by Tanya Matanova and Mariyanka Borisova in December 2019.

⁵ See interview with Ambassador Yuri Shterk – National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Phono-archives FnAIF 3077, file 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ About Bulgarian schools abroad see for example Gergova & Borisova 2021; Matanova 2017; Gergova 2017; Borisova & Gergova 2017; Kulov & Borisova 2017; Gergova & Borisova 2015.

⁸ Central State Archives of Bulgaria, fund 142, inventory 26, archive unit 149, sheet 1. A letter from the Bulgarian school in Rabat to the Ministry of Education in Republic of Bulgaria.

⁹ See interview with the teacher Marin Radev – National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Phono-archives FnAIF 3077, file 8.

¹⁰ The models were exhibited at the Russian Cultural Center in Rabat. See interview with the school principal and teacher Ani Radeva and her husband Ivan Radev – National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage, Phono-archives FnAIF 3077, file 2.

¹¹ Bulgarskoto nedelno uchilishte “Rodoliubie” v Maroko otbeliaza Denia na narodnite buditeli. [The Bulgarian Sunday School “Rodolyubie” in Morocco celebrated Enlightenment Leaders’ Day.] *Mfa.bg*, 5 November 2020. Available at <https://www.mfa.bg/embassies/morocco/news/26987>, last accessed on 18 November 2022.

¹² About Bulgarian dance folklore groups abroad see for example Borisova 2020; Gergova & Matanova 2017; Toncheva 2009; Ivanova 2003.

¹³ *Hortse* is the diminutive name of the Bulgarian folklore dance *hora*.

¹⁴ This Academy organizes a spectacular ballet performance every spring at the Mohammed V National Theater.

Archives

Central State Archives of Bulgaria. Fund 1477, inventory 20, archive unit 1678; fund 142, inventory 26, archive unit 149, sheet 1.

FnAIF = Phono-archive of the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

FtAIF = Photo-archive of the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

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