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Bulgarian *Chalga* on Video: Oriental Stereotypes, Mafia Exoticism, and Politics

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Since the mid-1990s, music video has been an essential part of the Bulgarian mediascape.[1] Local video production was born as an outgrowth of the expanding music cassette business and even today most music videos are released for purposes of promotion. However, during the last three years Bulgarian video production has been so prolific that it is not difficult to see it developing and advancing the local popular music scene in the near future. The increased availability of music video has been facilitated considerably by a commercial cable television net that has spread to all the bigger towns. By spring 2001 at least one Sofia-based cable TV channel, ONIX, broadcasted predominantly domestic video clips nonstop to private homes, and music bars and other public places (Dimov, p.c., 2 April 2001).

Compared to other Western countries, the era of Bulgarian music video is just beginning. Nevertheless, the style of production has changed remarkably during its short history, from amateur one-camera shots to sophisticated professionalism. Still, the Bulgarian music market is small and the country is relatively poor. This means that local music video is typically based on low-budget production. Accordingly, the first topic of this chapter is to demonstrate how, if at all, Bulgarian music video differs from the global Music Television format. My research materials comprise commercial videocassettes released for the Bulgarian market from 1995 to 2000.[2] While Bulgarian video production encompasses various kinds of

popular music, in the pages that follow I concentrate on the most popular genre, *chalga*.

In today's Bulgaria *chalga* is the general name for a new dance music that is a complex mixture of various musical styles and traditions. Quite often modern *chalga* is also called *pop-folk* or *etno-pop*. The components of this fusion include Serbian, Macedonian, Greek, and Turkish popular music; older Bulgarian pop songs; various styles of Balkan Romani music; Western pop, rock, techno, and rap; as well as the global currents of Afro-Cuban music, among others. *Chalga* is stylistically such a hybrid that defining it is not an easy task. However, at its stylistic core *chalga* features very distinguishable rhythmic patterns also associated with "oriental" or bellydance. These and other characteristics refer directly to an imagined "East" and specifically, to dance music styles found throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

To a Westerner's ears, *chalga* no doubt sounds quite oriental. However, what makes this problematic is the fact that Bulgarian culture as a whole is in several respects the opposite of the West. In Bulgaria the borderline between East and West is unclear and vacillating. Nevertheless, the oriental flavor of *chalga* is undisputed even among Bulgarians themselves, and accordingly, the *chalga* style is easily discerned from Bulgarian folk music and older popular styles by anyone who understands music in general. The central topic of this article is to determine what kind of meanings the oriental aspect of *chalga* constructs among Bulgarian audiences. An important point of departure is Edward Said's concept of orientalism (1995[1978]), which has been widely utilized in various studies connected with postcolonial criticism. However, while the peculiar oriental world presented by *chalga* videos may have some roots in the history of colonialism, I very much doubt the suitability of the Saidian interpretation for the analysis of Bulgarian culture and music in general. Nevertheless, I shall try to find an alternative explanation, one more relevant to the Bulgarian situation.

Before presenting these more theoretical arguments I shall analyze the content of *chalga* videos from various perspectives. Of particular concern is how "the oriental" in *chalga* has been produced. What are the main methods and models employed by musicians, actors and video directors in creating the oriental aura of these videos? My analysis deals with music, dance, and lyrics, but also with visual narration and set decoration. All of these elements are essential when producing the oriental or otherwise exotic and fairy-tale-like sentiments of *chalga* videos.

The politics of *chalga* is also one of my central topics. Contrary to Bulgarian popular music in general, many *chalga* songs and videos are full of social criticism. They comment on social problems, often in ways

that may confuse serious students of culture. Sexist soft porn seems to be a widely used method for ensuring the commercial success of *chalga* songs. The videos also contain aggressive jokes that display little respect for anyone or anything. The objects of mockery are various—politicians, the state administration, the *nouveaux riches*, the Bulgarian mafia, policemen, macho culture, the sex business, Arab sheiks, superficial lovers of fashion, Russian folklore troupes, and various Western fashion phenomena. Ironic criticism is often so well hidden that the outsider cannot understand it without the guidance and explanation of local cultural experts. Nothing in *chalga* is serious and its contents stray very far from Western political correctness.

Background on *Chalga*

In the 1990s, in the wake of general political and cultural breakthroughs, most European postcommunist countries experienced great changes in the music media. Two central features of this development were rapidly increasing local cassette production and music piracy, especially of Western hit music. In the beginning piracy also plagued music cassettes, but quite soon focused more exclusively on CDs. Centers for eastern European pirate production have moved from one country to another; the first were Poland and Bulgaria, followed by Estonia and Romania, and most recently, Ukraine. Over the last decade Russia has also acquired a notorious reputation in this field of black marketing.[3] Changes in production sites have followed the anti-piracy campaigns by the US and EU governments and the International Federation of Phonogram Industries (IFPI), which have targeted the most blatant cases of international copyright law violations. Governments have been urged and pressed to intensify anti-piracy monitoring and to tighten copyright legislation.[4]

In many former Eastern bloc countries the consumption of Western popular music has increased markedly. Cheap pirated phonogram copies have effectively circulated hits, and local recording industries have suffered from lack of demand and capital. Bulgaria, however, seems to be a different case. Especially since the mid-1990s, a real boom in domestic dance music has dominated the music media, and at the center of this trend is oriental *chalga*. *Chalga*'s popularity can be interpreted as a kind of protest and reaction against the communist regime's mono-ethnic cultural policy of the 1980s, according to which all people living in Bulgaria were accounted for as ethnic Bulgarians, and the existence of any minorities was officially denied. Muslim minorities, which include

Pomaks, Turks, and some Roma, were persecuted. In the 1980s, the Turkish minority especially fell victim to severe and aggressive discrimination. These measures consisted of compulsory Bulgarianization of Turkish names, forced resettling, and deportation (Poulton 1991:129–51).

All kinds of cultural idiosyncrasies and symbols of the respective minorities were also suppressed. Accordingly, all kinds of oriental dance music referring to Turkish or Romani culture were practically banned (Buchanan 1996b:207–212; Pennanen 2001). The collapse of the Communist regime at the turn of the 1990s also meant a great change in Bulgarian cultural policy. One of the most noticeable and far reaching expressions of this change was *chalga* and its enormous popularity.

The Balkans abound in paradoxes, and even in this case the models for oriental pop did not come first from the east, but from the west and south—namely, from Serbia and Greece. Before its dissolution Yugoslavia pioneered a new kind of popular music based on local traditions (NCFM), which also became well-known and popular in communist Bulgaria, mainly with the aid of pirated cassettes. Just as Yugoslavia was an ethnic patchwork quilt, so also were there a great many different local musical styles under the title NCFM; the most popular in Bulgaria was Serbian folk pop. In addition, the Greek pop song style called *laika* was very much liked by Bulgarians. (Dimov 1996b:31–33).

Only at the beginning of the 1990s did the term *chalga* come to refer mainly to dance music performed by Roma. Similarly, in the European part of Turkey, Rumelia, professional Romani bands are still called *çalgıcı* today, and in Macedonia the analogous term is č*algija* (Seeman 2000:7–11; Silverman 1996b:71–72). All of these terms derive from Turkish, where *çalgı* means "musical instrument." The history of these orchestras goes back to the Ottoman era, when their repertoire mainly consisted of Turkish classical and light music. Their historical roots in the Middle Eastern *makam* system can also be seen in recent times. Accordingly, the repertoire of modern electronic č*algija* is full of bellydance pieces (*cacique*), with typically long improvised solo passages in *tempo rubato* that follow the changing modalities of the dance tune.

In Bulgaria *chalga* also first became well known in association with similar *cacique* songs, which are typified by a bellydance rhythm in 4/4 or 9/8, long clarinet solos, and often, Romani lyrics.[5] However, many *kyuchetsi* are instrumentals, where a short theme is followed by almost endless improvisatory passages, often played in a very virtuosic manner. The cassettes containing *kyuchek* music from the early 1990s are technically of the poorest quality with severe distortion. Heavily distorted sound was no doubt one reason why Romani music was anything but highly valued among average Bulgarians.

During these years Romani *kyuchek* was shadowed by another *chalga* style. The orchestras playing Thracian wedding music (*svatbarska muzika*) enjoyed top popularity at this time. The best known soloist, clarinetist Ivo Papazov, was nearly a national hero.[6] Although *svatbarski* musicians were also often ethnic Roma and/or Turks, their music was in all respects better and more respectable than *kyuchek;* it was professionally performed, technically well recorded, extremely virtuosic, breathtakingly swinging, colorfully oriental and even the symbol of political resistance during the old regime (Buchanan 1995:387; 1996b:204–206). Nevertheless, wedding music had one big drawback. By stressing its virtuosity wedding music became very complex and fast, which made it unsuitable for dancing. During the 1990s, due to the lack of commercial success, many Thracian wedding musicians also started to play mainstream *chalga* with more danceable—and simple—rhythms.

By the mid-1990s a very interesting development had occurred. Bulgarian musicians mixed Romani *kyuchek* with Serbian- and Greek-influenced folk pop and adopted various new models from suitable international styles and artists, like the Gypsy Kings. This new combination started to be called *chalga*, a previously derisive word for anything of poor quality with a strong association to Romani culture. The development of *chalga* thus resembles the change in Yugoslav NCFM some ten years earlier. In Yugoslavia the Romani oriental sound, which incorporated several international hit tunes originating in Indian film music, also gave birth to a new music style that utilized Eastern musical stereotypes and was widely popular. As mentioned already, all this also influenced new Bulgarian popular music (Rasmussen 1991:128–32).

At the end of the 1990s the new style became an undisputed success on the Bulgarian popular music scene. The most popular *chalga* hits sold more than 100,000 copies, whereas domestic rock records could at best reach sales of 10–15,000 copies (Ivo Dochovski and Ventsislav Dimov, Interviews, 1999).

Commercial success considerably increased the cultural value of *chalga* with the Bulgarian public. Many Bulgarians often consider *chalga* the music of the new economic elite—the *nouveaux riches*. However, I have never understood the basis of this argument. One possible explanation is that *chalga* songs quite often portray a jet-set life and dreams of Western prosperity. On the grounds of audience consistency one could argue that the most eager *chalga* fans are to be found in certain youth groups and—somewhat surprisingly—among children. Strange or not, even some members of the intellectual elite have shown interest in *chalga*. However, based on interviews with local experts such as Ventsislav Dimov (1999) and Rozmari Statelova (1999), and my own observation of

chalga audiences (1997–2000), my sense is that intellectuals' interest mainly focuses on attempting to understand how on earth this sort of music—from their perspective, such "bad music"—could achieve such enormous popularity.

Nevertheless, a more typical academic attitude seems to follow the earlier line of the communist cultural elite. This attitude is nicely mirrored in literary historian Julia Stefanova's (n.d.) comment that Bulgarian culture "is being *chalga*gized"; here the term refers to "the general decline of culture—and the all-pervasive feeling that it is being submerged in subculture and surrogates." *Chalga* is also seen as evidence of how the new economic elite is totally unable to create convincing cultural legitimacy (Kessi 2001:5). On the other hand, the typical American feminist interpretation of *chalga* argues that the soft porn eroticism of many songs "glorifies the short-skirted, gold-digging *mutressa* as the ultimate expression of successful femininity" (Ghodsee 2000:10). According to this argument, *chalga* presents Bulgarian women as "ambitious bimbos" and thus strengthens the inequality between the sexes, which according to recent studies, has heavily increased in the era of transition economy (Ghodsee 2000:10).

The Style of *Chalga* Videos

In regard to content, roughly three basic types of *chalga* videos can be found: *concert videos*, *narrative videos* and *music-based videos*. These types came to mind quite spontaneously during preliminary analysis. However, they are similar to the classification schemes of early Western video producers. According to Simon Frith (1988:217), in the 1980s record companies divided "pop videos" into three broad categories: performance, narrative, and conceptual. Several different classifications can also be found, but usually they have been made by visual media scholars, for whom music is mainly seen as subordinate and thus having a minor role in visual and artistic design. However, my point of departure is quite the opposite. Due to my musicological background I tend also to interpret the visual content of the video with reference to music.

Concert Documentations

Many *chalga* videos can be called *concert documentations*. Stylistically this is the oldest type and clearly old-fashioned from the perspective

of modern video language. Such videos stress the musicians' role in performance and are documentary in many respects. Their content consists mainly of concrete descriptions of musical performance, which may then be diversified by inserts illustrating contextual landscapes and audience reactions.

Concert documentation is the dominant production model in the videos of Thracian wedding orchestras and some (other) Romani bands (e.g., Kristal, Kristali, Kitka). However, the spatial contexts employed are quite diverse; music is not only performed on a nightclub stage, in a concert hall, or a discothèque, but in strange and even absurd performance locales. Accordingly, the video clip *Sexy* by the group Kitka was shot on a Black Sea beach, where the musicians stand up to their knees in water and desperately try to appear to be playing. Not even the player of the electronic drums seems to be afraid of a short circuit, but allows the rhythmic accompaniment to continue between wet waves.

A subcategory of this type is the various festival videos produced every year at local folk pop mass events, such as the Trakiya Folk and Pirin Folk fests. Due to the technological advances of the late 1990s, *chalga* singers began performing live without orchestra—with the aid of a playback tape. However, this change did not cause the production of concert videos to cease. Several *chalga* artists continuously favor playback in their music videos. Dance groups performing pseudo bellydance or other choreography compensate for the absence of live instrumentalists. Interaction between singers and audiences is also illustrated in a more versatile way than was the case in older videos of dance band performances.

Narrative Videos

The other two types of *chalga* videos more closely resemble the so-called MTV format, which seems to have become the primary model for video production all over the globe. In the following analysis they will be called *narrative videos* and *music-based videos*. The narrative type consists of two or three separate visual plots. The first is more or less (often less) related to the song lyrics. Its main protagonist may be the singer herself, but this role may also be filled by an actor. The second is the singer's performance of the song, which she renders without any dramatic connection to the first plot. The third concerns dancers or landscapes that are also quite separate from the narrative of the lyrics.

Danŭtsi [Taxes], by Petra, the hit singer of the Payner company (1999) is a prime example of a narrative video whose primary plot is only tenuously connected to the lyrics (Video 4.1). The song text is mildly populist and consists of a long list detailing various taxed objects, as well as some exploiters of collected taxes. Its main theme is based on humorous juxtapositions (Fig. 4.1):

Taxes on *rakiya*,	Taxes for Reds,
taxes on the neighbor's wife,	taxes for Greens,
taxes on cars,	taxes for Blues,
taxes on women,	taxes for penguins,
taxes on trash,	taxes on olives,
taxes on ash,	taxes on bikinis,
taxes on *mezze*,	taxes on begging,
taxes on beach life	taxes for nothing.

Figure 4.1: *Danŭtsi*. Music by Stefan Tsirkov, lyrics by Pavel Fotev, performed by Petra. Payner Music, 1999.

The song's message is crystallized by its refrain:

Taxes, taxes,	you burn me,
you fatty cheese pastries,	you ruin me.

The song's melody is in the Phrygian mode and its harmonization is based on only a B minor chord. The refrain is quite contrastive; its accompaniment comprises a descending chord progression beginning in the subdominant: Em–D–C–Bm. In accordance with the general style of *chalga*, in the middle of the song there is a richly embellished trumpet-like solo with twisting melodic line, played on the synthesizer with the harmonic accompaniment based again on a B minor triad.

The visual narration is based on parody. Tax collection has been delegated to two lively militiamen with uniform caps. At the very beginning the hero of the story loses his temper because his car has broken down, and kicks it hard. The militiamen appear on the scene and fine the driver; then they walk away and tap an extra large pocket calculator. In the second episode the hero is sitting at a restaurant table with his girlfriend. He chats her up, clinks glasses with her and munches some *mezze* [snacks; appetizers]. Every action is suddenly disturbed by the militiamen, who demand payment with the huge pocket calculator. The same scenario is repeated in a hotel room, where the hero intends to make love to his girlfriend. The girl is supposedly involved in the taxation intrigue, and the funny militiamen appear again, this time from behind a wardrobe door.

Again it is time to pay taxes. Very soon the hero is totally without means and uses his last pennies for a cheese pastry. The militiamen pass by and snatch the pastry out of his hand: taxes, taxes. In the final episode the poor hero sits on the street begging and the merry tax authorities come once again and confiscate the beggar's pennies. Thereafter the militiamen throw their military caps to the ground and walk away tapping their large calculator while commenting: "super, super!"

The second level of visual composition consists of the vocalist, whose performance is inserted frequently between takes of the main plot, from which she is totally absent. She sings standing up, without moving, and her position is clearly that of an outside commentator, like a bard or a griot. These inserts follow the musical periods and are well synchronized with the visual narration.

Music-Based Videos

The *music-based* or *non-narrative chalga* video normally consists of countless segments of very short duration. The primary function of its visual components is to reinforce the musical structure and message. At its best this MTV-style format becomes a kind of music of pictures. Very often the visual rhythm can be even more complex than the musical rhythm. Among the videos in my collection only a few attained this postmodern version of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The reason is obvious. Video production is normally based on a very low budget that favors documentary but also narrative videos (cf. Fenster 1993:119–20). Producing a music-based video, with its innumerable visual fragments and many technical tricks is simply too expensive for Bulgarian producers.

Many non-narrative *chalga* videos are hybrids between the MTV format and old-fashioned stage style. Production development, however, is moving in a more international direction. In many of the most recent *chalga* videos the effects of new digital technology have been successfully utilized, resulting in various unrealistic but attractive special effects like partially invisible bodies or flying human figures.

A good example of a music-based *chalga* video is the 1997 hit song by Sashka Vaseva, *Levovete v marki* [*Leva* into marks] (Video 4.2). The work is similar to disco in style; the tempo is faster than in normal bellydance (M.M. 117) and the rhythmic accompaniment is a skillful mixture of monotonous techno pounding and some elements of *kyuchek* rhythm (see Fig. 4.2). It is in just this mixture that techno-*chalga* seems to deviate from global techno models, since the rhythmic accompaniment

is stuffed with various percussion sounds. The result is a playful game between the often contradictory connotations of disco dance and belly-dance.

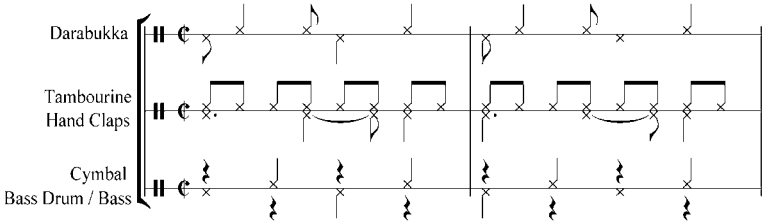


Figure 4.2: *Levovete v marki,* rhythmic accompaniment. Music by Sashka Vaseva. Payner Music, 2000.

The visual tempo, with its few constantly recurring inserts, is very fast when compared with other *chalga* videos. *"Levovete"* has no visual plot; the visual content comprises a semi-picture of the singer moving from right to left and vice versa, whereas the fast visual rhythm is constructed from rapid flashes of half-naked male and female dancers. A shot of a young man dancing is also digitally manipulated—only his torso is visible.

Nevertheless, this video is typical of the *chalga* genre. The verse melody emphasizes the *Hicaz* tetrachord C–D♭–E–F, while the harmonic accompaniment consists of the chord cycle C–D♭–C–B♭m, which stresses the semitone C–D♭. However, in the refrain the tonal center moves to F with the aid of the descending chord progression Fm–E♭–D♭–C. The lyrics are also quite political when related to the problems of today's Bulgarian society (see Fig. 4.3).

The Politics of *Chalga*

When compared to Western pop videos Bulgarian *chalga* is quite political music. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Bulgarian videos do not follow the conventions of international media entertainment. Most *chalga* videos deal with the traditional topics of pop songs: human relations, romantic love, passion, eroticism, and other daydreams. However, many artists' repertories also consist of songs that comment on everyday life and problems, even very bluntly.

At first glance the politics of Sashka's song seem quite farfetched, since the singer only wants to have fun:

Listen to me my darling,
listen to my request,
that I could get drunk tonight.

I'll exchange my *leva* for marks,
that I can drink wine at the moment.
Dollars are OK, *leva* are not;
if I get drunk,
let it at least happen in dollars.
You ain't got, you ain't got money, my love.
You ain't got any marks, dollars.
Nowadays it is dreadful and gloomy
if you have no money.
But if I should sing and drink all day long
it can't go on.

Figure 4.3: *Levovete v marki.* Music and lyrics by Sashka Vaseva.

A closer study, however, reveals that the lyrics also criticize the country's economic situation. Without dollars or (German) marks nobody in Bulgaria is anybody. A penniless boy cannot have a girlfriend as girls give their love to rich businessmen who have foreign currency. Importantly, this video was released in 1997, when the Bulgarian economy almost totally collapsed. Nearly all the banks went bankrupt and the value of the *lev* sank by tens of percents in one week (Kessi 2001).

The social and political problems that *chalga* videos target are usually connected to corruption, economic insecurity, and civil rights. The very same topics are frequently commented upon in the Bulgarian media. The term "political" refers here to all kinds of expressions and phenomena that are connected to cultural oppression and power relations. Thus the videos deal with questions of Bulgarian domestic policy, but also very typically refer to the more private sphere of society (family life, sexual relations, paternalism, women's liberation, the generation gap).

I shall now analyze another *chalga* video that comments on and challenges political questions widely discussed by the Bulgarian public. *Zhega* [Heat] was released by Valentin Valdes in 1997 (Fig. 4.4; Video 4.3). Valdes, in addition to Petra, is the most specialized artist critiquing and parodying political issues. His critical style is often very straightforward, but also ambivalent. From the Western feminist perspective Valdes's songs probably sound like nothing else but swinish chauvinism.

They are by no means politically correct, but quite brutal and insulting. As one of my friends in Sofia remarked, "Why should we be politically correct, since our everyday life is far from correct?"

Even the singer's own image is ambivalent. He looks like a senior mafia boss—slightly balding, with a stockily built body—and enjoys acting mafioso roles in his own videos. In addition, Valdes is famous for the flashy covers of his music cassettes, which display naked girls posing in various seductive positions reminiscent of Playboy pin-ups.

Zhega's Mixolydian melody is not typical of *chalga*. Still, as in several other songs, a Middle Eastern tone is created through a long improvised passage in the middle of the song, where the synthesizer, a sound well known in almost all *chalga* hits, plays a lengthy wailing melody with lavish embellishment.

The visual plot imitates the road movie typical of many Hollywood films and TV series. The artist is both singer and main actor. The plot consists of fast driving, car chases featuring Western luxury cars (a BMW and an Alfa Romeo), shooting, shady business, and bribing of customs officers and policemen who, of course, drive Russian Ladas. In his solo segments Valdes dances *kyuchek* with pretty young girls. He batters his girlfriend and his hobby seems to be serial polygamy (having several girlfriends one after another). To sum up, the hero of the song is a big bully and a frightening man whose orders will be obeyed.

The repeated references to "holding" in the refrain require explanation. "Holding" comes from the term "holding company" and refers to the private banks and insurance companies owned by the Bulgarian mafia, which were quite a common and hot topic in the Bulgarian press in the mid-1990s. The biggest insurance companies were VIS-2 and SIC, and their businesses were based on high profile advertising and even more aggressive marketing. The victims of these businesses were anyone who possessed any visible property—a car, *objets d'art*, an office, or detached house. The companies' method was simple and effective. A salesman approached a potential client to persuade her to take out an insurance policy. If the client refused, the companies' henchmen, the *bortsi* [wrestlers], were later sent to steal her car or ransack her office. Immediately thereafter the victim understood the benefits of an insurance contract (see, e.g., Nikolov 1997).

Such businesses were one of many money laundering schemes adopted by Bulgarian crime syndicates. During the socialist regime of 1994–1997, the government was unable to close down these businesses, in spite of ever increasing criticism in the Bulgarian press. In spring 1997 the new right-wing liberal government of Ivan Kostov came to power and was more effective in its anti-mafia policy. Very soon such insurance

businesses were declared illegal and the companies disappeared. Some politicians and officials with governmental ties allegedly were involved in these activities. This is probably the background against which the singer-mafioso's boasts about his future career as Sofia's mayor are set (Anonymous 1997).

I bought a BMW, yes I did.
I am sitting in a bar;
if someone touches my car
he will see bad visions every day.

Heat, heat in the center of Sofia. Oh-oh.

Take out an insurance policy with us.
"Holding" is a symbol of power.
"Holding" is a good thing.
Congratulations, Sofia!
Oh, oh, oh-hoo!

A ship landed at the port of Burgas,
with goods for me from Honduras.
Bravo, bravo, customs officers,
Bravo, bravo, policemen.
A frog is singing "Daddy,"
and I bought a Caddy.
Oh, oh, oh-hoo.

Heat, heat in the center of Sofia.
Oh-oh.

Do not ask me who I am,
but ask how much power I have.
Three years in succession
I shall be the mayor of the capital.
Oh, oh, oh-hoo!

They are speaking of me:
"he is competent but unfit."
I know it.
I won't even twiddle my thumbs.
Be aware, if you don't pay in cash.

"Holding" is a good thing.
Congratulations, Sofia!
Oh, oh, oh-hoo!
Are you ready?

"Holding" is a good thing.
Congratulations, Sofia!
Take out an insurance policy with us.
"Holding" is a symbol of power.

Figure 4.4: *Zhega.* Music and lyrics by Valentin Valdes. Payner Music, 2000.

Producing the Oriental: Dance and Music

Connecting *chalga* to orientalism requires the presence of "Eastern" features in the music, lyrics, or visual language of the videos under study. One must, however, point out that "Easternness" in orientalist art is a very elusive and relative quality. According to the often cited definition, orientalism refers to an imagined "Easternness" and the representation of

the East in Western culture; in the words of Derek Scott (1997:9), "Orientalist music is not a poor imitation of another cultural practice: its purpose is not to imitate but to represent." Consequently, oriental features of orientalist art can be either fully invented or based at least partly on a certain cultural model from the East. Audiences need only recognize the oriental signifier, which is often stereotyped as a shared experience of the East. For instance, according to British cultural historian John MacKenzie (1995:142), in the eighteenth century Turkishness or Turkish flavor was signified by Western composers with the aid of the C major scale, but also with fast shifts between major and minor keys, sudden chromaticism, and especially through various percussion effects like loud drumstrokes and gong noise.

Pinpointing *chalga*´s oriental stereotypes is complicated by the fact that, for some Westerners, Bulgarian music in general already sounds oriental. One possible solution can be found in *chalga*'s Romani associations. Accordingly, it is likely that even today *chalga*'s "Easternness" is mainly constructed by Bulgarian audiences in reference to stereotypical, shared images of Romani music. Furthermore, the oriental tinge of *chalga*'s overall sound is typical of and attributed to Romani musicians. For many decades, if not centuries, in all the Balkan countries Romani musicians have been the messengers of popular music from the eastern Mediterranean and even from India (cf. Pettan 1996b:37–41). This is important to keep in mind when analyzing the oriental features of *chalga* in terms of musical, visual, and mental imagery.

In *chalga* videos fewer references to the Middle East can be found in the song texts. In fact, only when the video plot is geographically located in "Eastern" surroundings does this occur. In such cases the oriental context generally also appears in the name of the song, as in *Kapali charshiya* [The biggest bazaar in Istanbul], *Mechtata na sheiha* [The dream of the sheik], and *Harema* [The harem]. However, these are rare among the great majority of *chalga* songs. This observation reveals something very essential about *chalga*'s "Easternness." Usually *chalga* videos do not directly refer to the Eastern world; rather, such references are almost always more indirect.

The videos' choreographic content favors Eastern references considerably more. Most striking is the role of "Eastern" dance. Here and elsewhere the use of "Eastern" in quotes indicates that we should speak of dance orientalism, where "Easternness" is represented by both imagined and real references to the East. One such fictional East is that presented by the dance troupes that have evidently been recruited for video clips from top tourist restaurants in Bulgaria and elsewhere. Their performance style is often a pastiche of Western revue tradition and socialist staged folklore,

and their "Easternness" has more to do with decorative costumes and props than choreography. For instance, the dancers do not concentrate on hip and stomach movement, but on limb movement; such performances may even involve raising the legs *à la* the can-can.

Since the early 1990s Bulgarian videos have featured a dance style that resembles Turko-Arabian bellydance, and gradually this style has taken an "authentic" turn. The oldest *chalga* video of my corpus, Knezha's *Mechtata na sheiha* [The dream of the sheik], consists of a veiled dance that fits the sheik theme well. During the performance two relatively tall female dancers shake themselves to a *çiftetelli* rhythm. The only hint of a more conventional harem bellydance is the hand movements. The dancer's torsos are quite stiff, their hips move very moderately, and their high-heeled shoes make clear that this performance is but an adaptation of more traditional Ottoman Turkish dance.

During the years 1995–1996 several videos with more typical Turkish bellydance were released. Stiletto heels gave way to slippers or bare feet. Dancers' bellies were typically well structured and their hip movements so intensive that they had clearly undergone lengthy training. Such performances can be seen on video clips by the groups Kozari, Kristal, and Yuzhen Polah, although there are also artists performing more imagined oriental dance in the very same videos. In *chalga*, both real and imagined orientalism interact to form a very exciting texture and very often it seems quite pointless to try to define its authenticity.

The same exciting fabric appears in the music itself. In Bulgarian music it is not easy to define "Easternness" on the grounds of musical sound and tone, which is a relatively appropriate method for the analysis of Western musical orientalism. The reason is, of course, the already mentioned "Eastern" flavor of all Bulgarian vernacular music, which can be heard among other things in the sound of traditional folk instruments. The sound of lutes, flutes or clarinets used in Bulgarian folk and popular music does not particularly differ from that of their more eastern and southern counterparts. Even the accordion, which is usually associated with Western music, has adopted quite unique ways of embellishment and phrasing from Bulgarian vernacular instruments like the *gaida* [bagpipe] and the clarinet. This all makes Bulgarian accordion playing very original in comparison with Central European or Russian accordion styles.

Nevertheless, the musical signs of *chalga* orientalism can be found and analyzed, and the best way is to start with the striking stereotypes that seem to come into nearly every *chalga* song, but are totally absent from other kinds of Bulgarian vernacular music. The first and most striking feature is no doubt the bellydance rhythm, which in the Balkans is usually known as *çiftetelli*. Bulgarian *kyuchek* consists of various rhythmic

patterns (2/4, 4/4, 9/8), but modern *chalga* seems to favor the duple-meter patterns resembling *çiftetelli* rhythm. The same 4/4 rhythmic pattern is to be found in most of my research material (Fig. 4.5). Typical of this pattern are the main beats on the first and third and counter beats on the second and fourth quaver and on the fourth quarter. The most central syncopation beat is the quaver. The bellydance rhythm cannot be identified without it, and I have never observed the quaver to be absent even in the most reduced versions of *chalga* accompaniment. On the other hand, emphasizing the quaver is essential for the process of *chalga* modernization. This is an important point of departure when mixing this rhythmic pattern with Latin-influenced global dance rhythms.

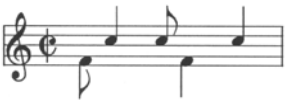


Figure 4.5: The *kyuchek* rhythm in 4/4 time.

Chalga songs are usually rendered at a relatively slow tempo (M.M. 80–85), which makes their rhythmic syncopation clear and effective. A steadily rolling accompaniment with thrilling syncopation also makes hip swinging easy, and this very fact has probably been one of the main reasons for the long-lasting popularity of *çiftetelli* in the eastern Mediterranean cultural sphere.

Simple bellydance rhythms have contributed to *chalga*'s development in two ways. Firstly, *çiftetelli* differs decisively from the additive rhythms typical of Bulgarian music, which have become a kind of trademark of traditional *hora* [line dance tunes], folk songs, as well as academic *narodna muzika*. In the case of *chalga* rhythmic simplicity guarantees stylistic distinction. It differentiates the genre from older dance tunes. Secondly, the bellydance rhythm is easily modified. It fits well with various models of international popular music and thus facilitates musical fusion.

The second stereotypical sign of orientalism is the melodic structure of *chalga* songs. Actually there are only two types of melodies that directly refer to the "East." Most *chalga* songs follow these types. The melodies in question contain the minor second, which occurs in both the Phrygian minor form and in a major form that recalls *makam Hicaz*, and the augmented second, which occurs in the latter mode. These modes are also well known in traditional Bulgarian music, but their use has occasionally proven problematic for aesthetic and political reasons. According to Donna Buchanan (1995:402), *Hicaz* was sometimes coded

by the professional folk musicians as inauthentic and a symbol of Turkishness and Gypsiness, especially when the melodic line of a song persistently emphasized the mode's lower tetrachord. Notably, this very feature seems to typify *chalga* melodies. In addition, some professional folk musicians disdained compositions in which different regional traditions were mixed together. Yet exactly this kind of fusion seems fundamental to *chalga* aesthetics.

Chalga songs usually exhibit a verse-refrain structure. The harmonic background of the verse usually consists of just one chord, while the melody emphasizes the intervals of the lower tetrachord of *makam Hicaz* (for example, C–D♭–E–F). Another typical harmonic formula utilizes three chords surrounding the finalis and emphasizing the minor second: C–D♭–B♭m–C (see Fig. 4.6). The same chord progression is typical of Phrygian melodies (for example, Cm–D♭–B♭m–Cm). The harmonies of the refrain, however, typically begin on the fourth tone of *Hicaz* and form a descending harmonic line (Fm–E–D♭–C). This ambivalent feeling of tonality is characteristic of many *chalga* songs. A similar accompaniment pattern occurs in the standards of international Romani music; in Spanish *flamenco* it is called *cadencia andaluza* (Huotari 1999:105). This similarity is persuasive evidence of *chalga*'s background as a musical fusion between domestic Bulgarian, Romani, and international repertoire.

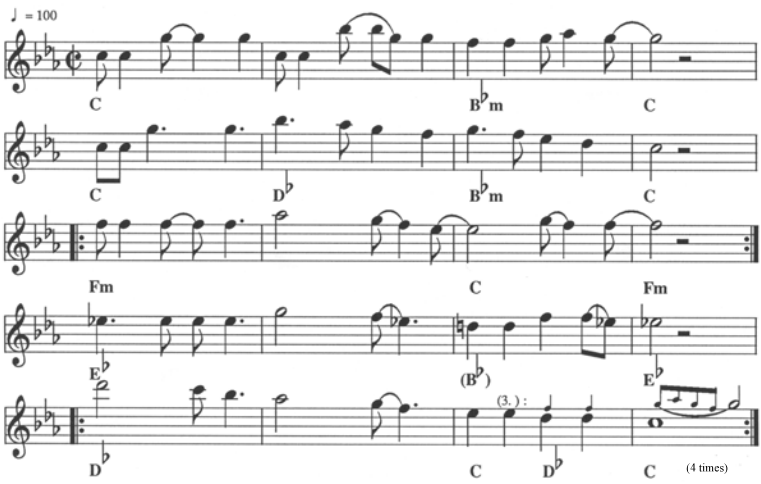
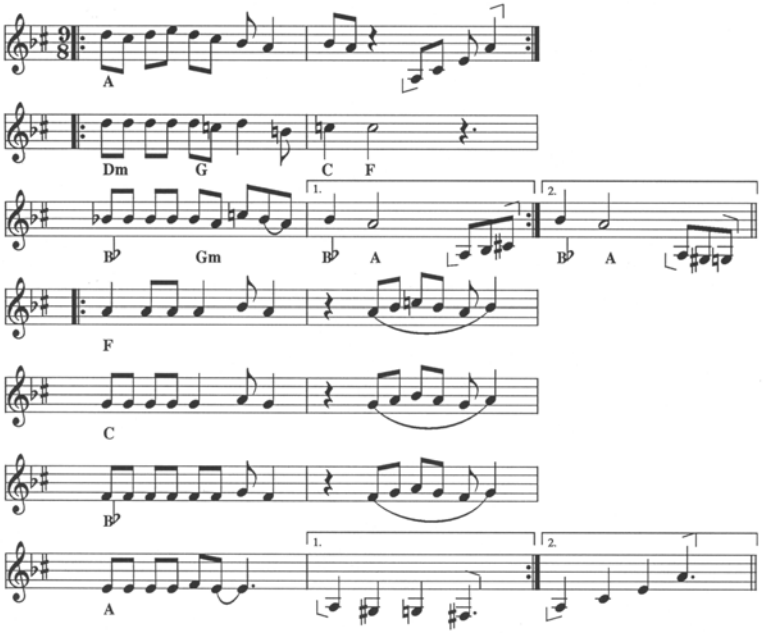


Figure 4.6: *Levovete v marki.* Melody and harmonic accompaniment. Music by Sashka Vaseva.

Accordingly, the refrain's mode utilizes F as its tonic and the *Hicaz* tetrachord as the upper four tones of the harmonic minor. The move of the tonic from C to F also makes it possible to interpret a *chalga* song according to Western music theory. This connection enables many *chalga* composers to create a new harmonic line for the refrain according to the so-called circle of fifths, a standard technique widely used in Western art and popular music since the Baroque era.

The next example is the *chalga* hit *Menteta, menteta* [Fake, fake] by Kiril Lambov (CD 4.1; Fig. 4.7).[7] The song shows that not even modern pop-*chalga* can always resist the powerful local tradition of additive rhythms. Instead of a simple 4/4 bellydance rhythm the song is played in 9/8, which is a very typical meter in various styles of traditional dance music—not only in Bulgaria, but all over the Balkans. The arranger has used the circle of fifths in such a way that the tonic becomes the fourth tone of the *Hicaz* tetrachord. Simultaneously, when the sequence moves on, the chord cycle temporarily takes the melody out of the *Hicaz* mode. The refrain structure is typical of many other *chalga* songs.



Refrain (follows each verse):

The fake, the fake,
it brings thick coins,
foreign and our own.
It goes straight to the
businessman's heart.

1.Today, every second drink
on the marketplace,
my brother, is a fake.
Original labels and caps,
and the bundles of banknotes
will increase.

2. The fake is in fashion.
Though the distilleries were
closed,
in garages, cellars, and base-
ments
a nice substitute will be made.

3. The day before yesterday,
my neighbor Iliya
bought a bottle of *rakiya*.
Though he drank it with *mezze* and
salad,
he still landed in the Orlandovtsi
graveyard.

4. There is fake whiskey and fake
gin.
First your purse is lightened
and then, if you sip it enough,
in the morning you may find your-
self in a hospital.

5. Now you can also find policemen
one hundred percent fake.
They stop tourists on the highway
and pick up foreign currencies.

6. All of life, brother, is a fake.
If you look at those in the Parlia-
ment,
they are disputing, quarreling, de-
bating,
and still the laws are failing.

Figure 4.7: *Menteta, menteta.* Composed and arranged by Kiril Lambov; lyrics by Mimi Taralkova; performed by Georgi Sergiev & Orchestra Diamant; transcription by Jarkko Niemi.

A third musical signifier of the "East" is the synthesizer timbre in *chalga* songs. It can be easily recognized due to the fact that nearly all the *chalga* bands use the same sound palette resembling a nasal wind instrument (oboe, clarinet, *zurla*). A synthesizer sound akin to the Balkan folksy trumpet is also often used—the trumpet solo is an important part of Serbian folk pop (*turbo folk*), which also makes it useful in *chalga*. The main function of the synthesizer is to play an "Eastern" wind solo (i.e., a *taksim*) in the middle of the song. This instrumental passage is a regular element of every *chalga* song, almost without exception. The nasal and harsh synthesizer sound makes *chalga* different from the other types of Bulgarian national songs that can also be found in the video hit collections released by the Payner company. Most non-*chalga* hits typically speak about romantic love and longing and are strongly influenced by an older type of local popular music called *starogradski pesni* [old urban songs]. The synthesizer is also used in those recordings, but the overall sound is

very different—the synthesizer typically imitates a violin section, the flute, or other instruments close to the European salon orchestra tradition.

Producing the Oriental: Visual Content

My next topic of analysis is the various visual symbols and images referring to the Orient in *chalga* videos. A firm point of departure is an argument according to which the narration and myths behind today's popular culture are fragmentary (cf. Barthes 1985:110–15). They are places to visit, to fall into short-term ecstasy and then return to everyday life. In global entertainment, orientalism and oriental culture are likewise not real, but mythical fragments marked by exotic moments and excitement. Oriental styling is thus akin to a remote corner of the world, where well-to-do tourists travel, usually not to become acquainted with local habits and conditions but, above all, to take a rest, experience oblivion, adventure, or ecstasy.

Table 4.1: Oriental Myths and Stereotypes in *Chalga*

Classic Oriental Images	Modern Exoticism
1. Erotic bellydance; harem women	1. Sexist soft porn
2. Sheiks, sultans, and eunuchs	2. Mafia, machismo, *mente*
3. Arabian and Indian wonderlands	3. Western opportunities, money-making
4. Palmreaders, miracle workers, snake charmers	4. Atavism, the sovereign Big Brother
5. Nomadic Gypsies	5. Sailing, wind surfing, costly hobbies
6. Old cabaret props	6. Western fashions
7. Horse and camel riding	7. Expensive German cars
8. Old Bulgarian townscapes	8. Seascapes; waterfalls
9. Wine drinking and conviviality	9. Whiskey drinking
10. Orient as fairytale	10. Orient as political satire

Chalga hits consist of at least two kinds of mythical images, continuously intermingling, which I call classic oriental images and modern exoticism. The former derive from older stereotypes of orientalist entertainment. They form an interesting mixture of images recalling Romani culture, the Middle East, the Far East, and the miraculous Shangri-La, the Never-Never-Land of the Orient. The second group reflects the political and cultural situation of today and the recent past; they are thus more topical, local, and often full of references to political blunders and economic decay. Nevertheless, the two sorts of imagery are connected to each other; as I show below, it is not difficult to find a modern equivalent for each classic oriental stereotype (see Table 4.1).

Furthermore, there is a third, potential group of orientalist stereotypes that are conspicuous by their absence. I call these sanitized oriental images. Their absence is best explained by Bulgarian cultural history and especially by the nation's problematic relation to the Ottoman past (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Sanitized Oriental (Ottoman) Images

Landscapes with mosques and minarets
Praying Muslims and veiled pilgrims
Ottoman culture; the fez
Modern Turkey; the crescent flag

In *chalga* videos, mythical references to the Ottoman past seem quite exceptional. This music is mainly for entertainment, and references to Ottoman culture, Islam, or even to modern Turkey are probably too sensitive for Bulgarian show business. However, this does not mean that orientalism connected to the Ottomans is unknown in Bulgarian culture. According to Maria Todorova (cited in Buchanan 1996b:216–17), during the communist regime, the Ottoman past was a very common way of explaining the backwardness of Bulgarian culture. Even today, I suppose, Ottomanism is used to explain many cultural and economic characteristics, which could be much better understood as a result of the communist system: ineffectiveness, regionalism, parochialism, mental apathy, resistance to economic change, and lack of Western rationalism, among others. Therefore, if some sensitive topics seem to have been omitted in *chalga* videos, other highly political topics appear instead. Some of the most popular images of the modern exoticism are directly connected to the

politics of *chalga* and reflect the main problems of postcommunist Bulgarian society: organized crime, corruption, and poverty.

1. From Erotic Belly Dance and Harem Women to Sexist Soft Porn

The first topic on the list, dance and eroticism, is one of the most popular and, likewise, most natural types of oriental imagery. As noted above, a common denominator of oriental hits is the *kyuchek* rhythm, which is closely related to oriental bellydance. Thus it is not surprising that a female dancer can be seen in almost every *chalga* video. Thanks to scanty costumes and seductive choreography, bellydance nearly always has an erotic undertone, which may also be the secret of its success, at least in the Balkans. Nevertheless, it seems quite typical of the recent cultural climate that *chalga* producers would replace politically correct eroticism with sexist soft porn.[8] The trend is pronounced on cassette covers. A typical cover consists of a photo of a singer or an orchestra. From time to time, however, musicians are replaced with an almost naked girl, dressed in a traditional courtesan costume or otherwise seductively. Mitko Dimitrov, the director of the Payner company, Bulgaria's biggest video publisher, explained this convention as follows: "The question of what the musicians look like is no problem to us. If an artist is not good-looking enough, we use these pin-up girls for our cassette covers" (Interview 9 October 1996).

2. From Sheiks and Sultans to the Mafia and *Mente*

Mighty sheiks and sultans as well as cruel and bestial eunuchs are an obligatory aspect of classic orientalism; nor does it take long to find them in Bulgarian *chalga*. In popular narratives, however, these mythical personalities are usually set in the present time. So, for instance, the sultan in Valentin Valdes's hit song *Harema* is by no means an Ottoman sultan, but a modern sultan of Brunei, who tries to seduce a pretty Macedonian girl called "Sexy Madonna." After the girl turns him down, explaining that she is too young and already has a boyfriend, the sultan promises to pay millions of dollars and a huge amount of oil, if only this "most beautiful lady of Macedonia" will consent to his proposal.

Such classic heroes of orientalism also have their modern equivalents, and in Bulgarian *chalga* they are the mafia, the macho personality, and the

mente. Though most Bulgarians obviously dislike mafia culture and the ever-blossoming underground economy, the logic of popular culture very easily makes these criminal anti-heroes into famous heroes. Accordingly, there are several new pop songs that speak in flattering terms about macho-type businessmen, for whom everything in the world is possible. For instance, the 1996 hit song *Tigre, tigre* [Tiger, tiger] by the group Belite Shisharki is a story of illegal business and the generosity of a mafia boss. In 1997 the song was allegedly popular especially among the young macho gentlemen with sun glasses and well-tailored suits hanging around in the bars of Sofia's nuclear center.

The *mente* motif is also associated with criminality, but in a more ambiguous way. The word *mente* means a fake, substitute, or fraud. In Bulgaria and elsewhere in postcommunist European countries, one side effect of the economic crisis has been moneymaking with the aid of inferior and counterfeit goods. In marketplaces and kiosks, homemade spirits with original-looking labels are sold; the worst of these brews may cause sudden death or destroy the drinker's sight. Such fabricated goods can also be found when buying canned food, clothes, watches, or recorded music. The *mente* motif is presented from many angles in Kiril Lambov's 1995 *chalga* song *Menteta, menteta* above (Fig. 4.7), where the problem of compromised goods moves from street vendor level to political satire. In this song "the fake" refers not only to *rakiya* (clear grape brandy), but also to policemen and politicians. By the song's conclusion the entire political system is explained as belonging to the same *mente* category.

3. Eastern Wonderlands and Western Business Opportunities

As already mentioned, the orientalism of *chalga* seems to neglect images connected to Ottoman culture and modern Turkey. Instead, Eastern exoticism in general, from Arabia to India and even to the Far East, is abundantly presented. Alongside these classic images *chalga* favors several modern symbols, especially any reference to Western wealth, such as luxury cars and foreign currency. American banknotes are a popular motif on cassette covers. A very nice example is a 1996 cassette cover by the band Melodiya, whose central theme is an American hundred-dollar bill. However, it has been manipulated so that its right half is that of a one hundred *leva* note. Could the Bulgarian dream of wealth and prosperity be better represented?

Aspirations to a wealthy Western lifestyle have been ironically interpreted in the song *Zavrŭstane v Berlin* [Return to Berlin] by Valentin Valdes (1996). The singer is totally fed up with poor economic conditions in Bulgaria and plans to travel to Berlin as a gigolo. He knows some elderly ladies there with whom he will be able to live a jetset life. At the end of the song our hero concludes his playboy career by marrying an aged *Berliner Frau*—for money.

4. Miracle Workers and Big Brother

The fourth oriental image on the list, various fortune tellers, recalls the strong position of Romani exoticism in Bulgarian *chalga*. Accordingly, a very typical personality in oriental videos is a female Romani palmreader. Snake charmers can also be found, as can miracle-mongers, whose abilities include healing a sick woman with the aid of a melancholy oriental tune, played with the clarinet directly into the patient's ear. All these examples prove that ancient magic rites remain powerful, even in modern video culture.

The modern form of miracle working is the myth of the Big Brother or Robin Hood who helps weaker citizens with their everyday problems. The Big Brother may be a mafia boss, as was the case in *Tigre, tigre,* but he may also be a Party leader, as in the song *Dyado Mraz* [Santa Claus] by the same orchestra (1995). The song tells of a benefactor who arrives on Christmas Eve with his black Mercedes from the well-known residence of the Bulgarian government on Vitosha Mountain. The singer is sitting at home and eagerly waits for this political Santa Claus, hoping to get roasted ham, lots of wine, and a new car for Christmas. The message of the song is clear: one has only to sit and wait; Big Brother will certainly help. My critical friends in Sofia pointed out that this kind of paternalist mentality was very typical of communist times. The citizens were somewhat apathetically used to waiting for Party decisions. As Katherine Verdery (1996:25) put it, the Communist Party "acted like a father who gives handouts to the children as he sees fit. The Benevolent Father Party educated people to express needs it would then fill, and discouraged them from taking the initiative that would enable them to fill these needs on their own." Similarly, the Bulgarian state had its Big Brother or Father in Moscow, who in the name of socialist fraternity, helped its smaller and weaker vassal.

5. – 7. Romani Exoticism, Fashion, and Travel

The abundant Romani exoticism of *chalga* videos is mirrored by the abundant utilization of the Eastern European cabaret tradition. When a recording stage is needed, the video producers seem to favor the night-clubs of huge tourist hotels; dancing girls and "variety ballet" corps working in the hotels are hired to play belly dancers, nomadic Gypsies, or dancing courtesans, as needed. The results are often tragi-comic, as young girls with little aerobic training attempt to perform bellydance, or classically trained ballet dancers romp about in a staged Romani camp.

As a modern equivalent to cabaret scenes, various images of modern jetset and tourist life are also favored by the videos. Expensive hobbies, like sailing and windsurfing, are presented on several clips. Fashionable clothes seem to be an extraordinarily important aspect of these modern images. Actually, it is not easy to find a video where the lead singer could not simultaneously work as a fashion model. The general rule is that an artist dresses in at least three different costumes for each song, and these clips are frequently mixed with each other.

Horse and camel riding, so typical of classic oriental stories, are almost completely absent in *chalga* videos. These images have been replaced by Western luxury cars, usually German cars made by BMW and Daimler-Benz. During the communist regime, a Western car was an indisputable symbol of power. Only diplomats, Politburo members, and top officials had Western cars, usually a black Mercedes. The general public could not buy any Western cars; if lucky enough, they purchased Russian Ladas or East German Trabants. A Western luxury car continued to be a power symbol in the 1990s, when Bulgarian mafiosi and more reputable *nouveaux riches* started displaying their prosperity with the aid of big foreign limousines. Now common citizens can afford Western cars, but usually only in theory, due to the poor economic situation. So far a luxury car continues to be a popular image, not only of power but of daydreams of Western living standards.

8. Townscapes and Water

Beyond nightclubs and restaurants, *chalga* videos use only two other basic backdrops: old picturesque townscapes and touristic scenes of the Black Sea coast. These scenes are often used one after another several times during a video clip; the former strengthens classic oriental images, while the latter symbolizes a desired modernity and wealth. Nevertheless,

old town scenes, usually from Plovdiv or Veliko Tŭrnovo, undoubtedly also have strong national symbolic value. Old buildings are important evidence of Bulgaria's long history and its unique civilization before the Ottoman period; Veliko Tŭrnovo was the country's capital in the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, nearly all Bulgarian music videos—not just *chalga*—continually use one and the same symbol: flowing water. It is very likely that water means happiness in two different ways. Flowing water is a symbol of mountainous Bulgaria, a guarantee of life and continuity. On the other hand, water has a very positive meaning in oriental mythology. The Arabian nomads and other heroes of mythology found water in the oases, the paradise-like places in the middle of arid deserts. Accordingly, water is a fundamental part of the oriental paradise.

9. Wine to Whiskey

The fact that delicious and spicy food can be found everywhere in the country demonstrates that Bulgaria belongs to the Orient. Although the Ottoman past is commonly rejected, the tradition of the Turkish kitchen has not disappeared. Bulgarians are also proud of their marvelous wines; these are the subject of several hit songs stressing national and regional spirit. No wonder the actors drink and feast on all kinds of delicacies in every second *chalga* video. Delicious food and wine are an indispensable part of Bulgarian happiness, a foundation of social life.

Whiskey drinking, so typical of many oriental videos, is more difficult to explain. However, the suffering and absent-minded singer-heroes very often drink whiskey—not *rakiya*, *mastika*, or other Balkan spirits—but Scotch whiskey. Perhaps whiskey refers simply to one of the global luxury symbols exoticized by the videos. On the other hand, I have realized that whiskey drinking is also a fundamental part of night life in Athens and Istanbul. It is possible that whiskey is one of the most important traces that the British Empire left behind in the Balkans—and in the Orient—as a remembrance of its previous influence.

10. From Fairytale to Political Satire

At the most general level, *chalga* videos usually present two moods in association with their main messages. The first is the Orient as fairytale and the second is the Orient as political satire. The first type is used far more often, since a fairytale mood is closer to the romantic and harmless

character of popular songs and videos. However, political satire is also quite often present to some extent, as has been shown in the previous examples of political *chalga*.

Conclusions: *Chalga* and the Discourse of Orientalism

Chalga production can be perceived as entailing the revival of strong oriental features in Bulgarian popular music. Those features refer directly to Turkish and Greek dance music, although formerly they were usually adopted through a circuitous route, via Serbia and Macedonia. *Chalga*'s popularity seems to be based on these features. It makes one wonder if *chalga*'s reception can be explained in terms of the orientalism that for centuries has been influential in Western art and entertainment. However, linking Bulgarian music to orientalist discourse is not a simple matter.

At first sight the discourse of orientalism seems irrelevant, when the meaning of the term, Bulgaria's geographic position, and its cultural history are considered. Orientalist discourse stresses at least three factors that do not suit the Bulgarian situation well. Firstly, orientalism usually derives from Western attitudes toward the East, or conversely, to the representation of an Eastern cultural heritage in the Western world. Accordingly, orientalism tells us more about Westerners than about Eastern cultures (Said 1995:21; Scott 1997:9). Secondly, orientalism is based on the peculiarities of Eastern culture. For the peoples and states of western Europe and North America, the East has really meant the "foreign Other," ideas about which have been based more on imagination than reality, fact, or cultural contact. Thirdly, in its truest essence, orientalism reveals the history of Western man's feelings of cultural superiority. It firmly views the East as a land of insecurity, chaos, violence, and corruption. For centuries orientalist images remained quite unchanged with the aid of the stereotypes created by belles lettres, visual arts, and travel reports (Said 1995: 6–7, 300–301).

According to Said, orientalism is directly connected to the history of colonialism as well as to postcolonialist media criticism. Orientalism is seen as an effective tool for harnessing nonwestern cultures to the maintenance of Western political and cultural hegemony. Orientalism has guaranteed that the East has remained of lower value when compared to the West. Orientalism also means that the Orient can only be understood and interpreted by relating it to the Western worldview. In a way, Western orientalism does not accord the East the right to an independent existence.

It seems obvious that Saidian theory does not fit well with Bulgarian *chalga*. All the essential attributes and connections between orientalist discourse and *chalga* seem upside down.

Can Western orientalism appear in Bulgaria, although the country and its culture belong to the East? Theoretically speaking this is possible, since one of the core areas of classic orientalism in the last century was colonial India. However, Bulgaria's case is still different; it was never colonized by the West. From Bulgaria's eastern border it is slightly more than 200 kilometers to Istanbul, maybe the most important center of oriental myth, and the metropolis where most of the images and stories of the Ottoman Empire are located. Just behind Bulgaria's eastern border is Edirne, formerly Adrianople, where the winter camp of the Ottoman army was regularly situated for centuries and from which the military expeditions to Europe usually started (Wheatcroft 1995:52).

A second reason for Bulgaria's "Easternness" can be found in more recent history. In the period 1945–1989 the country was a loyal member of the Soviet bloc. During the Cold War years the Soviet Union was not only politically the opposite of the West, but a real objective of neo-orientalism. In Western publicity and in the Westerner's imagination the Soviet Union was connected to stereotypes similar to those of earlier, colonialist orientalism: inefficiency, cruelty, irrationalism, wickedness, secrecy. In recent Bulgarian publicity, classic orientalism, Soviet orientalism—and the newest type, mafia orientalism—as well as their related images and explanations seem to be merging in an interesting fashion.

Bulgaria was a possession at the heart of the Ottoman Empire and later on, the Soviet Union's most obedient vassal. Except for the relatively short era of the Bulgarian kingdom in modern times (1879–1944), the orientation of the country was more to the East than to the West. Superficially, the recent political trend favors an eastern orientation since in the complex political scene in the Balkans, Bulgaria and Turkey seem to have found each other. The old political struggle of ethnic minorities seems to belong to the past, and bilateral trade has increased greatly. The trade boom also concerns the music business: raw material for domestic music and videotapes, for example, is mainly imported from Turkey. Istanbul, the largest metropolis in the Balkans, is again becoming the Bulgarian Tsarigrad, the Emperor's town. (Suvilehto 1999:153–56; Ivo Dochovski, Interview, 1999).

Rapprochement with Turkey, however, is basically a result of regional power politics; culturally speaking the eastern cardinal point does not necessarily mean anything. Actually, even the Eastern connection possesses a predominantly Western-oriented objective. Like all the Balkan

countries—including Turkey—Bulgaria's greatest political goal is integration with western Europe in the European Union. Especially during the recent liberal right regime Bulgaria has officially been strikingly Western-minded and Western-oriented. The same holds true for public opinion, where freedom of travel without the so-called Schengen visa has been a subject of much discussion and even public demonstrations. Nevertheless, the recent desire for European integration and Western living standards together with the Eastern-oriented past form the ultimate reason why orientalism seems to be a valid point of departure for the analysis of modern Bulgarian culture. However, postcolonial criticism is not necessarily the best perspective on Bulgarian orientalism.

Orientalism still contains one feature that explains its popularity in the Balkans as well as in other cultural areas between East and West (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and no doubt also in Finland). Orientalism is a means of withdrawal, of cultural distinction. Although "Eastern" culture is very close, orientalism helps maintain a distance from it. Orientalism does not usually represent "Eastern" culture as serious and real. On the contrary, the East of orientalism is fabled, playful, and mythical. Since the Orient is unreal, the eastern engagement is also unreal. Paradoxically, an orientalist attitude to the East means rejecting the East. Finally, orientalism furthers the process of westernization.

Rejecting the Orient is also the result of the carnivalist tone often related to cultural products utilizing the oriental myth. It may not be coincidental that in the Balkans as well as in Russia and eastern Central Europe Roma have been important producers of orientalism as well as typical representatives of the "East" in music, literature, and the visual arts. Roma are an ethnic group that cannot be easily located or assimilated. In the modern nation-state Roma have no easily defined space or cultural locus, and therefore they make an excellent symbol of imagined "Easternness." For centuries, especially in Russian tradition, Roma have been a mythical cultural niche associated with various carnivalesque activities. Accordingly, in Russian literature and folklore Roma are always present when local heroes want to forget everyday life by feasting and boozing, gambling and dissipating, or in a word, when they want to turn cultural values upside down (Broms 1985:159; Crowe 1996:164–69). It is not unlikely that a similar stereotype would function in the Balkans. As a matter of fact, I argue that the popularity of modern Bulgarian *chalga* is rooted in this very stereotype.

In general, a carnivalist attitude surrounds the style and production of new *chalga* songs. Performing serious matters as jokes or ambiguous hints suits texts dealing with politically sensitive topics well. In the modern media political parody is very often the more effective way of communi-

cation than political seriousness and propagation. In light music, actually, there is no other way of performing sensitive matters. At the very moment when a performance takes a propagandist turn, the music's lightness disappears. Political songs like the *Marseillaise*, the *Internationale*, or *Horst Wessel* are no doubt popular music—music for the masses—but it is absolutely wrong to connect them to the terms pop, light music, or entertainment.

In conclusion, the meaning of orientalism is for Bulgarians very different from what it means for western Europeans or Americans. Bulgaria's orientalism is not based on a Western-dominated, colonialist past. On the contrary, there the colonialist past has involved subordination to eastern empires: the Byzantine, Ottoman, and finally, Soviet. The Ottoman legacy makes the meanings of oriental popular music positive—the negative connotations typical of the Saidian idea of orientalism disappear. *Chalga* is a music of freedom and distinction that neither mocks nor devalues "Eastern" culture. For Bulgarians, the Orient of *chalga* is also a source of self-irony. It helps them to find and comprehend their identity. Furthermore, the orientalism of *chalga* helps its fans to break free from the hegemony of the cultural elite that was formed by the Bulgarian nation-state. At least they can take a more critical and liberal attitude to highly praised national culture. In the final analysis *chalga* orientalism paradoxically mirrors and emphasizes its apparent antithesis, the westernization of culture. After the sultans and fairytale figures with "Eastern" treasuries have been transformed into mafia businessmen and Western luxury goods, the target of irony is no longer the East but Western life and the dreams connected to it.

Notes

1. This article is a result of several field trips to Bulgaria during 1995–2001, and the final part of my research project "Cassette Culture in the Post-Communist Balkans" funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Bonn), the Academy of Finland, and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. I wish to thank the following colleagues for their abundant advice and help in completing the article: Lozanka Peicheva, Rozmari Statelova, Ventsi Dimov, Ralf Petrov, Ivo Dochovski, Risto Pennanen, Risto Blomster, Antti-Ville Kärjä, Jarkko Niem, and, of course, Donna Buchanan. Special thanks to Ilkko Suvilehto, who translated the Bulgarian song texts to Finnish.

2. This collection comprises 40 videos, 150 cassettes, and 15 CDs of *chalga.* However, the in-depth analysis presented here focuses mainly on those hit videos released by the Payner company and some LPs (see Discography).

3. See Anonymous 1999; IFPI 2000; and Kurkela 1997:183–84.

4. The IFPI anti-piracy campaign has only been partly successful. The situation is worst in those countries where the so-called second economy (black market) is extensive. Accordingly, in all of the above-mentioned states the domestic piracy production rate still exceeds 50 percent. In Russia the piracy rate is estimated at 75 percent of all phonogram production (IFPI 2000).

5. The terms *cacique* and *kyuchek* derive from the Turkish *köçek*, which originally referred to young boy dancers at the Ottoman court, and now refers to bellydance in general (see Feldman 2000:4–11).

6. Papazov's given name is Ibrahim Hapasov; this was changed to the more Slavic Ivo Papazov in accordance with the former Bulgarian premier Todor Zhivkov's ideological campaign against Turkish and Muslim minorities. Papazov has has been marketed in the West as Ivo Papasov. For the sake of consistency, he is referred to as Ivo Papazov throughout this volume (Ed.).

7. The song's text is explained below.

8. This phenomenon is also common in Romania, where concerts of Romani oriental music are usually combined with beauty contests, cabaret evenings, or strip-tease presentations. Peter Manuel (1993:215–21) has also found in North Indian popular music a commercial *rasiya* genre that is full of oozing eroticism. However, the *rasiya* cassette covers introduced by Manuel (1993:231–33) seem to be more tame than my own Bulgarian examples.