

ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)



ISRG PUBLISHERS

Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci

ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)

Journal homepage: <https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss>

Volume – IV Issue - IV (July – August) 2026

Frequency: Bimonthly



Folk Song, Cultural Memory, and Community Identity: The Kapanci of Northeastern Bulgaria

Venelin Terziev^{1*}, Petar Kirilov²

¹ Professor, Eng., D.Sc. (National Security), D.Sc. (Economics), D.Sc. (Social Activities), Ph.D., Black Sea Institute, Bourgas, Bulgaria

² PhD Student, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria

| **Received:** 18.08.2026 | **Accepted:** 22.08.2026 | **Published:** 29.08.2026

***Corresponding author:** Venelin Terziev

Abstract

This study examines the Kapanci folk song tradition through the interconnected perspectives of cultural memory, cultural identity, and intangible cultural heritage. Folk songs are approached not merely as artistic expressions, but as living cultural practices through which collective memory, social values, and community belonging are preserved and transmitted. Focusing on the Kapanci community of Northeastern Bulgaria, the study explores the role of traditional songs in maintaining cultural continuity and reinforcing local identity. Particular attention is given to collective performance, including the distinctive practice of antiphonal singing, and to the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. The analysis also considers contemporary challenges associated with demographic decline, migration, urbanization, and changing mechanisms of cultural transmission. The study highlights the continuing role of community centers (chitalishta), folklore ensembles, educational initiatives, and local festivals in sustaining the Kapanci song tradition. The findings demonstrate that folk songs remain living repositories of collective memory and important mechanisms through which cultural identity is actively created, performed, and transmitted across generations.

Keywords: Kapanci, Folk songs, Cultural memory, Cultural identity, Intangible cultural heritage, Intergenerational transmission.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of cultural heritage has undergone significant transformation. While earlier approaches focused primarily on the preservation of monuments, historical buildings, and material artifacts, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of living cultural practices as essential

components of human heritage. This shift has been particularly evident following the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), which emphasizes the role of communities, groups, and individuals in creating, maintaining, and transmitting cultural traditions across generations.

Among the various forms of intangible cultural heritage, folk songs occupy a distinctive position. They function not only as artistic expressions but also as repositories of collective memory, social values, local knowledge, and cultural identity. Through oral transmission, traditional songs preserve narratives about the past, encode community experiences, and reinforce a sense of belonging among their performers and audiences.

The present chapter focuses on the Kapanci, an ethnographic group inhabiting parts of Northeastern Bulgaria, primarily within the region of Razgrad and neighboring territories. The Kapanci are widely recognized for their rich cultural heritage, distinctive folklore, traditional customs, and highly preserved song traditions. Despite extensive ethnographic and folkloristic research conducted during the twentieth century (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974), the Kapanci song tradition remains insufficiently examined from the perspective of cultural memory, narrative placemaking, and identity construction.

Rather than approaching folk songs solely as musical or literary artifacts, this study interprets them as cultural narratives through which local communities create and sustain relationships with place. Songs are viewed as carriers of collective memory that connect contemporary community members with previous generations and with the cultural landscapes in which their traditions emerged (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1952/1992). Through their performance, transmission, and social functions, folk songs contribute to the symbolic construction of place and reinforce the cultural identity of the Kapanci community.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of Kapanci folk songs in preserving cultural memory, strengthening local identity, and contributing to narrative placemaking within the community. Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining perspectives from folklore studies, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and heritage studies. It draws upon published folkloric collections, ethnographic research, historical sources, and contemporary scholarship on intangible cultural heritage and cultural memory (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

2. Theoretical framework: Cultural identity, memory, and intangible heritage

The concept of cultural identity has become one of the central themes in contemporary humanities and social sciences. Rather than being understood as a fixed or inherited characteristic, cultural identity is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and socially constructed process through which individuals and communities define themselves in relation to their past, their cultural traditions, and the social environments in which they live. Identity is continuously negotiated through shared experiences, symbolic practices, and collective representations that provide communities with a sense of continuity and belonging (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

Within this perspective, narratives play a fundamental role in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity. Narratives are not merely stories about the past; they are interpretative frameworks through which communities organize their experiences and construct meaningful understandings of themselves. Through narratives, communities identify common origins, shared values,

historical trajectories, and symbolic connections to particular places.

For traditional communities, oral culture remains one of the most important mechanisms through which such narratives are transmitted. Songs, legends, rituals, and oral histories function as cultural texts that preserve collective experiences and reinforce social cohesion. Through repeated performance and intergenerational transmission, these forms of expression contribute to the reproduction of community identity and cultural memory.

Folk songs are particularly significant in this regard because they combine verbal, musical, and social dimensions of cultural communication. Their performance creates opportunities for collective participation while simultaneously preserving narratives concerning community history, social norms, and local traditions. Consequently, folk songs may be understood as narrative practices through which cultural identities are continually reaffirmed and reproduced.

The concept of cultural memory has become increasingly influential in understanding the ways societies preserve and transmit knowledge about their past. Maurice Halbwachs, whose work established the foundations of memory studies, argued that memory is fundamentally social in nature (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). According to Halbwachs, individuals remember within social frameworks that shape what is remembered, how it is remembered, and why particular memories remain significant.

Building upon these ideas, Jan Assmann introduced the distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory (Assmann, 1995). Communicative memory refers to memories transmitted through everyday social interaction, typically extending across several generations. Cultural memory, by contrast, consists of symbolic forms, rituals, texts, and cultural practices through which communities preserve knowledge over longer historical periods (Assmann, 2011).

Folk songs occupy a central position within this process. They preserve collective experiences, social norms, symbolic meanings, and historical interpretations that contribute to the construction of shared memory. Even when songs do not provide direct historical information, they reveal how communities remember and interpret their past. Their significance therefore extends beyond artistic expression to encompass broader cultural functions related to identity, belonging, and historical consciousness.

Drawing together the concepts discussed above, folk songs may be understood as narrative heritage practices that simultaneously preserve cultural memory, reinforce community identity, and contribute to narrative placemaking. Their significance extends beyond their musical and poetic qualities to encompass broader social and cultural functions (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974).

3. The Kapanci community: Historical and cultural context

Among the numerous regional and ethnographic groups that contribute to the cultural diversity of Bulgaria, the Kapanci occupy a distinctive position due to the remarkable preservation of their traditional culture, strong local identity, and rich folklore heritage. They are generally recognized as one of the oldest ethnographic communities in Northeastern Bulgaria and have attracted sustained

scholarly attention because of the unique characteristics of their language, customs, material culture, and musical traditions (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974).

The Kapanci inhabit a relatively compact geographical area located primarily within the present-day Razgrad Province and neighboring parts of Targovishte and Ruse regions. Their settlements are concentrated within the historical and cultural landscape of Ludogorie, a region characterized by fertile agricultural land, rolling hills, and long-standing patterns of rural settlement. Villages traditionally associated with the Kapanci include Topchii, Kamenovo, Dryanovets, Senovo, Ezerche, Getsovo, Krivnya, Osenets, Sadina, Palamartsa, and several others that continue to maintain elements of the community's cultural heritage.

One of the most notable features of the Kapanci is the persistence of a strong collective identity. Unlike many regional populations whose local identities have weakened under the influence of modernization and migration, the Kapanci have largely preserved a distinct sense of community belonging. The ethnonym "Kapanci" remains actively used by community members themselves and functions as an important marker of cultural affiliation. Even among younger generations, the term continues to symbolize attachment to local traditions, family history, and regional heritage by linking subjective belonging with ancestral lineage (Hall, 1990).

This enduring sense of identity has played a significant role in the preservation of cultural practices, particularly folk songs and ritual traditions. Community members often perceive these cultural expressions not merely as forms of entertainment but as symbols of shared history and collective belonging. Consequently, the maintenance of traditional songs contributes directly to the reproduction of Kapanci identity across generations (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

Traditional cultural practices played an essential role in this process. Seasonal festivals, family rituals, communal celebrations, and folk performances provided opportunities for social interaction and cultural transmission. Participation in these events enabled community members to reaffirm their shared values while simultaneously reinforcing social ties between generations.

The importance of collective participation remains evident today. Although contemporary social transformations have altered many aspects of traditional life (Terziev et al., 2025a), cultural institutions such as community centers (chitalishta), folklore ensembles, local museums, and regional festivals continue to support the preservation of Kapanci identity. Through public performances, educational activities, and heritage initiatives, these institutions contribute to the maintenance of cultural continuity within changing social environments.

Among the many expressions of Kapanci cultural heritage, folk songs occupy a particularly important position. They function simultaneously as artistic expressions, social practices, and mechanisms of cultural transmission. Unlike written historical records, songs preserve community experiences through performance and collective participation, allowing cultural knowledge to remain embedded within everyday social life (Halbwachs, 1952/1992).

4. Kapanci folk songs as narratives of place

One of the most significant contributions of folk song to community life lies in its capacity to transform geographical space into culturally meaningful place. While physical landscapes provide the environmental setting for human activity, it is through collective experience, memory, and cultural expression that these landscapes acquire symbolic significance. Folk songs play a central role in this process by embedding local knowledge, historical experiences, and social values within narrative and musical forms (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

For the Kapanci community, songs have traditionally functioned as more than artistic performances. They serve as cultural narratives that connect individuals with the landscapes in which their ancestors lived, worked, celebrated, and transmitted traditions (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974). Through repeated performance, songs reinforce symbolic relationships between community members and their local environment, creating what may be described as a shared cultural geography.

Traditional Kapanci songs preserve numerous references to the natural environment and to the landscapes that have shaped community life over generations. Fields, meadows, forests, springs, rivers, and village surroundings frequently appear as symbolic settings within song narratives (Todorov et al., 1985).

These references should not be interpreted simply as descriptive elements. Rather, they function as cultural markers that encode collective experiences associated with specific environments. Agricultural landscapes, for example, often symbolize productivity, family continuity, and community cooperation. Natural settings become stages upon which important social events unfold, including courtship, seasonal celebrations, labor activities, and ritual performances.

Perhaps the most important contribution of folk songs to narrative placemaking lies in their capacity to preserve collective memory. Songs function as cultural archives that store information about social relationships, historical experiences, moral values, and community traditions.

Unlike written historical documents, songs preserve memory through performance. Their meanings are transmitted not solely through texts but through participation, repetition, and collective interpretation (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). As a result, they remain living forms of cultural knowledge that continue to influence contemporary understandings of community identity (Hall, 1990).

For the Kapanci, songs contribute to the preservation of memories associated with family life, marriage customs, agricultural practices, religious celebrations, and local traditions (Todorov et al., 1985). Even when specific historical details become less prominent over time, the symbolic meanings embedded within songs continue to reinforce a sense of cultural continuity.

From the perspective of narrative placemaking, community memory preserved in song serves as a bridge between people and place. Songs remind community members not only where they come from but also why particular places remain culturally significant (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

5. Folk songs and the construction of cultural identity

Cultural identity is not maintained solely through historical knowledge or formal cultural institutions. It is continuously

reproduced through everyday practices, shared experiences, and symbolic forms of expression that provide individuals with a sense of belonging. Within the Kapanci community, folk songs have historically functioned as one of the most important mechanisms through which collective identity is expressed, transmitted, and reaffirmed (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974).

Traditional songs serve as recognizable markers of cultural distinctiveness. Their texts, melodies, performance styles, and social functions distinguish the Kapanci from neighboring communities while simultaneously reinforcing internal group cohesion. Through participation in song traditions, individuals become connected to a broader cultural framework that links personal experience with collective memory (Assmann, 2011).

The significance of these songs extends beyond musical performance. They function as symbolic expressions of community membership, allowing participants to identify themselves as part of a shared cultural tradition (Hall, 1990). In this respect, folk songs contribute to what Benedict Anderson describes as imagined communities, which are social groups whose members experience a sense of connection through shared cultural practices and representations (Anderson, 1983).

For the Kapanci, the continued performance of traditional songs provides a tangible expression of local identity. Whether performed during festivals, family celebrations, or community gatherings, songs reaffirm a sense of belonging that transcends individual experience and connects participants to a larger cultural heritage by transforming geographical spaces into emotionally safe, culturally meaningful places (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977).

Folk songs constitute important vehicles for the transmission of social values and cultural norms. Through narrative structures, symbolic imagery, and recurring themes, they communicate community expectations regarding appropriate behavior, social responsibilities, and moral conduct.

Within the Kapanci tradition, many songs emphasize values that have historically occupied a central position in community life. Respect for family, diligence in work, loyalty, honesty, mutual assistance, and social responsibility frequently appear as recurring themes (Todorov et al., 1985). These values are not presented through abstract moral instruction but are embedded within stories, emotional experiences, and symbolic representations that make them culturally meaningful and memorable.

The role of folk songs in identity construction cannot be fully understood without considering the social contexts in which they are performed. Songs derive much of their cultural significance from collective participation and shared experience.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Kapanci musical tradition is the practice of antiphonal singing, commonly known as singing “na dva kura” (“in two groups”). This performance style involves the alternation of musical phrases between two groups of singers, creating a dynamic form of musical dialogue.

Beyond its aesthetic qualities, antiphonal singing possesses important social functions. The structure of the performance requires cooperation, attentiveness, and collective coordination among participants. As a result, the musical process itself reinforces social relationships and promotes a sense of community unity. Collective singing transforms individual voices into a shared cultural expression. Participants become active contributors to the preservation of tradition while simultaneously experiencing

membership within a larger social group. Through such performances, cultural identity is not merely represented but actively produced.

Perhaps the most important contribution of folk songs to cultural identity lies in their role as mechanisms of intergenerational transmission. Cultural traditions survive only when they are successfully communicated from one generation to the next. Folk songs facilitate this process by providing accessible and memorable forms through which cultural knowledge can be preserved and shared.

Historically, children and young people encountered traditional songs within family settings, communal gatherings, agricultural activities, and ritual events. Through participation and observation, they gradually acquired familiarity with the musical repertoire, symbolic meanings, and social values embedded within the tradition.

Contemporary social transformations have altered many of these traditional mechanisms. Urbanization, migration, demographic decline, and the influence of global media have reduced opportunities for informal transmission (Terziev et al., 2025a). When folklore is removed from its original rural isolation, its survival becomes dependent on national frameworks that support the socialization of living heritage in modern spaces (UNESCO, 2003; Cultural Policies, 2025). This movement into globalized contexts redefines how oral traditions adapt to survive in the twenty-first century (Peycheva, 2008). Nevertheless, community organizations, folklore ensembles, schools, and cultural institutions continue to support the preservation of traditional songs through institutional and educational innovation (Terziev et al., 2025b).

The successful transmission of folk song heritage depends not only upon preserving musical forms but also upon maintaining the social contexts that give those forms meaning. Songs remain culturally significant because they continue to function as expressions of identity, memory, and belonging. In this respect, the Kapanci song tradition represents an important example of how intangible cultural heritage contributes to cultural continuity. Through ongoing performance and transmission, folk songs sustain connections between past and present while enabling communities to maintain distinctive cultural identities within changing social environments (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

6. Contemporary challenges and heritage sustainability

Like many rural communities across Europe, the Kapanci have experienced profound social, economic, and demographic transformations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Processes such as industrialization, urbanization, migration, and globalization have significantly altered the social environment in which traditional cultural practices historically developed and functioned (Terziev et al., 2025a).

In the past, folk songs formed an integral part of everyday life. They accompanied agricultural labor, seasonal rituals, family celebrations, and communal gatherings (Todorov et al., 1985; Vakarelski, 1974). The transmission of songs occurred naturally through participation in community activities and direct interaction between generations. Traditional cultural knowledge was embedded within everyday social practices and required no formal mechanisms of preservation.

Contemporary social conditions differ considerably from those that supported the traditional transmission of folklore. Rural depopulation, declining birth rates, labor migration, and changing lifestyles have reduced opportunities for sustained participation in community-based cultural activities. As a result, many traditional practices no longer occupy the central role they once held within community life.

One of the most significant challenges facing the preservation of Kapanci folk song heritage is demographic change. Many villages associated with the Kapanci community have experienced population decline, aging demographics, and increased migration toward urban centers or abroad.

The consequences of these demographic processes extend beyond population statistics. Traditional mechanisms of cultural transmission rely heavily on regular interaction between generations (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). When younger community members leave rural areas, opportunities for informal learning and participation become increasingly limited.

Older tradition bearers frequently possess extensive knowledge of songs, rituals, and local customs, yet the transfer of this knowledge may become more difficult when younger generations are physically absent from community life. In some cases, traditional repertoires survive primarily through the efforts of a small number of dedicated individuals who continue to participate in local cultural activities.

The continued vitality of Kapanci folk song traditions depends significantly upon the activities of cultural institutions and community organizations. Local community centers (chitalishta), folklore ensembles, museums, educational institutions, and cultural associations play a crucial role in supporting heritage transmission and public engagement.

These institutions provide structured opportunities for learning traditional songs, organizing performances, documenting cultural practices, and promoting awareness of local heritage. Their activities help compensate for the decline of informal transmission mechanisms by creating new contexts in which cultural knowledge can be shared through targeted educational and institutional innovation (Terziev et al., 2025b).

Particularly important are folklore festivals and community gatherings that bring together participants from different generations. Such events create spaces where traditional songs remain socially meaningful and publicly visible (Assmann, 1995). They also strengthen social networks that support the continuation of cultural practices.

Community involvement remains essential because intangible cultural heritage cannot be preserved solely through documentation (UNESCO, 2003). Heritage survives when communities continue to recognize its value and incorporate it into contemporary cultural life (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the Kapanci folk song tradition through the interconnected perspectives of cultural memory, cultural identity, and intangible cultural heritage. The analysis has shown that folk songs occupy a central position within the cultural system of the Kapanci community. Their significance extends far beyond artistic expression or musical performance. Through oral transmission, collective participation, and ritual use, songs preserve

cultural knowledge, communicate social values, and reinforce community cohesion by constructing shared mental frameworks of what must be remembered (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). They serve as living repositories of collective memory (Assmann, 2011), enabling successive generations to maintain connections with inherited traditions while adapting to changing social realities.

The study has also highlighted the role of folk songs in the construction and maintenance of cultural identity. The Kapanci case illustrates how identity is continually reproduced through participation in shared cultural practices rather than existing as a fixed or inherited characteristic (Hall, 1990). Songs communicate community values, reinforce social norms, and provide opportunities for collective engagement, thereby strengthening feelings of belonging and cultural continuity. Particularly significant is the role of collective performance, such as antiphonal singing. Traditional singing practices transform individual participation into communal experience, creating social spaces in which cultural identity is actively enacted and reproduced.

The preservation of folk song heritage faces significant contemporary challenges. Demographic decline, migration, urbanization, and globalization have altered many of the traditional contexts within which songs were historically transmitted (Terziev et al., 2025a). These transformations have weakened some of the informal mechanisms through which cultural knowledge passed between generations.

The Kapanci experience also reveals the resilience of intangible cultural heritage. Community centers (chitalishta), folklore ensembles, educational initiatives, local festivals, and heritage organizations continue to provide important opportunities for cultural transmission and public engagement through targeted educational and institutional innovation (Terziev et al., 2025b).

The findings of this study support contemporary heritage scholarship emphasizing that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires more than documentation and archival preservation (UNESCO, 2003). Sustainable heritage practices depend upon the active participation of communities and the continued social relevance of cultural traditions. Folk songs survive not because they are recorded, but because they continue to be performed, remembered, and valued by the people who recognize them as part of their cultural identity.

The Kapanci song tradition ultimately demonstrates that cultural heritage is not simply inherited from the past. It is actively created, performed, and reinterpreted in the present. Through song, memory becomes lived experience, place becomes cultural meaning, and identity becomes a shared narrative that connects communities across time (Kirilov, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

References

1. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
2. Assmann, J. (1995). Collective memory and cultural identity. *New German Critique*, (65), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>
3. Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Cultural policies: safeguarding and socialization of cultural heritage: (intangible and movable). (2025).

5. Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory* (L. A. Coser, Ed. & Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1952).
6. Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
7. Kirilov, P. (2026a). The song tradition as a form of cultural memory and ethnocultural identity of the Kapantsi. *Scientific Atlas*, 2026(16), 48–71. ISSN 2738-7518.
8. Kirilov, P. (2026b). Folklore as verbal culture and the ethnocultural identity of the Kapanci. *Scientific Atlas*, 2026(16), 72–82. ISSN 2738-7518.
9. Kirilov, P. (2026c). The musical-folklore system of the Kapantsi: Genre evolution, vocal techniques, and the transformation of tradition. *Scientific Atlas*, 2026(16), 83–122. ISSN 2738-7518.
10. Peycheva, L. (2008). *Mezhdur seloto i globalnoto selo: Zhivata traditsionna muzika v Balgariya prez XXI vek* [Between the village and the global village: Live traditional music in Bulgaria in the 21st century]. Prof. Marin Drinov Academic Publishing House.
11. Relph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. Pion.
12. Terziev, V., Georgiev, M., & Simeonov, S. (2025a). Cultural transformations as part of social transformations. In *Innovation and sustainability in digital era: The role of economics and business strategies with education perspectives* (pp. 373–386). Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b22930>
13. Terziev, V., Georgiev, M., & Simeonov, S. (2025b). Social transformations and changes in the educational process. In *Innovation and sustainability in digital era: The role of economics and business strategies with education perspectives* (pp. 349–360). Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b22930>
14. Todorov, D., Mihaylova, G., Vasileva, M., & Mladenov, M. (1985). *Etnografski prouchvania na Balgaria: Kapanci* [Ethnographic studies of Bulgaria: Kapanci]. Izdatelstvo na BAN.
15. Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
16. UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>
17. Vakarelski, H. (1974). *Etnografia na Balgaria* [Ethnography of Bulgaria]. Nauka i Izkustvo.