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The Social Construction of a Saintly Woman in Bulgaria

Ilia Iliev

The Bulgarian family underwent significant transformations during the second half of the 20th century. One of the new and interesting patterns that emerged was the practice of entrusting grandmothers with the upbringing of children. Before the 1950s, this task was predominately a mother's duty. This change provoked rearrangement of the age roles within the family, especially concerning child rearing. Today, older women, often the grandmothers, carry out activities that a generation earlier defined the mother's role in the family.

This text investigates how contemporary Bulgarian women have grasped, interpreted, and defined these changes in age roles. I will focus on Baba Vanga, a Bulgarian clairvoyant, prophet and saintly woman, who enjoyed enormous popularity in socialist and post-socialist Bulgaria. I will rely primarily on concepts and interpretations that local people, whom she addressed, employed in identifying and creating the prophet. This text, thus, will present an exercise in "thick description."

Maiden, mother, grandmother

There is a place in Bulgaria called Rupite. It is the center of a cult celebrating a controversial personality, who was simultaneously a saint, prophet and soothsayer. Rupite is a narrow valley of less than one square kilometer, near the southwestern town of Petrich. A couple of decades ago only the local inhabitants knew of the Rupite valley, where they occasionally visited mineral hot water springs.

Since the 1970s, when the prophet settled there, Rupite became famous across Bulgaria and, to a certain extent, in Russia, Greece, Macedonia and Romania. The prophet's name was Evangelia, but all Bulgarians knew her as Baba Vanga or Granny Vanga. It is said that she officially consulted up to 100 persons every morning. The visits unofficially continued in the afternoon, when she received dozens of visitors.

Upon arriving in Rupite, a visitor is first impressed by abundant vegetation, unusual for the region, which is rather arid. Rupite is situated between a curve of the Struma River and the small mountain Kozhukh, which is an extinguished volcano. The valley was a marshland until the 1950s when it was drained. The visitors coming from Petrich, however, continued making their own "ponds" by digging small holes in the ground. Mineral water would soon spring out and form a pool. In addition to these man-made puddles, there are two permanent hot water pools on the western side of Rupite: an "official" one, embedded in concrete with person checking coats and a porter distributing tickets, and a larger, "unofficial" one, with muddy banks. Both pools are located near the Kozhukh Mountain, and serve as a remainder of the mountain's former volcanic activity. The mountain itself is inaccessible from the Rupite valley. The mountain has been proclaimed "a protected area" because some endangered species live there. The local inhabitants, however, know it primarily for numerous species of snakes, including two poisonous kinds. Occasionally, a poisonous snake from Kozhukh would disturb the pilgrims in Rupite.

Closer to the valley's center, there is a public fountain with sulfurous mineral water. The water is almost boiling and one has to wait a couple of minutes for it to cool off, if one wishes to drink from it. Reputedly, the fountain water can cure several diseases, but pilgrims avoid it because it is rumored that the water comes directly from hell. The neighboring dark mountain with its poisonous snakes and the sulfuric evaporation from the two pools add credibility to this tale. Less than two hundred meters from the fountain, now closer to the eastern side of the valley, lies another source of water—fresh, cold water. A small white church stands near it. It

is dedicated to St. Petka-Paraskiva from Epivatos, in Rupite better known as "St. Petka the Bulgarian." Pilgrims attribute this fresh water source to celestial powers.

Between the hot springs on the left side and the fresh spring on the right side, lies a small orchard, most noticeable because of several dozen hens that wander around it. The hens belong to a species quite uncommon in Bulgaria. They are black and rather independent. Pilgrims say that they were imported from India. Unlike the common Bulgarian chicken, they fly short distances and prefer to sleep on tree branches. Their voices sound strange and unpleasant when heard for the first time.

In the middle of the orchard lies the house of Baba Vanga. During the last decades of her life, until her death in 1996, it was one of the most venerated places in Bulgaria. Leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party and ministers of the socialist government use to discreetly visit Baba Vanga. After 1989, presidents and Prime ministers came amid crowds of reporters from all national media. Foreign dignitaries such as the former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi were brought to visit as well. Apart from these dignitaries, crowds of ordinary Bulgarians, mostly middle-aged women, regularly visited the prophet's house.

During most of the year, the house is almost hidden by the profuse foliage in the garden. Although each Bulgarian country house—except maybe those kept by widowers—has a small garden with vegetables, flowers and fruit trees, this one is rather specific. Everything in it seems exaggerated: the blossoms too heavy, the branches too thick and the green leaves have a deep olive hue uncommon in Bulgaria. Although the garden is only a few dozen square meters, one can understand why some authors wrote in admiration that Baba Vanga "cannot be seen behind the flowers in her garden." Some plants are still in the pots in which pilgrims brought them, while others have been planted. Several varieties are quite exotic for Bulgaria. Pilgrims brought them from distant lands to demonstrate gratitude.

Keeping poultry and tending a garden are typical for Bulgarian country households. The most famous Bulgarian ethnographer noted more than a century ago that, "hens are of utmost importance. One expected the poultry to have, first and foremost, a place among a housewife's domestic, female duties."¹ The abundance and quality of poultry constitute a source of pride for every exemplary wife and are an object of competitive display. They are a part of the "female" household, unlike the larger domestic animals, which belong to the household's "masculine" part. In the Bulgarian folklore, a woman is often compared to a hen. This comparison is not

¹ Dimitar Marinov, "Zhiva starina" in: *Izbrani proizvedenia*, II, 1984, 43-939, p. 49.

extended to younger or older generations like in other European folklore; thus, a young girl is never compared to a chicken. Only housewives, particularly married women and mothers, are associated with a hen.

The garden is another typical feature of Bulgarian country dwellings. Situated in the courtyard, it sometimes reaches up to 2000 square meters. The garden is a principal source of income for the household, supplying it with vegetables from March through October.² During the socialist period, these gardens were the only land privately owned by peasants. In tending these gardens, peasants demonstrated their true economic ingenuity and taste. They were kept extremely well and were the household's source of pride. (As it is now widely known, nobody worked seriously on cooperative lands and, in any case, it was impossible to discern any personal input in the common fields.) Tending the garden was and still is a housewife's duty, although girls seem to have some involvement as well. A couple of generations ago, every girl was expected to keep a small flower garden. Blossoming red flowers in the garden, a red bouquet in her hair or red floral patterns on her shirt were a sign that she had her first menstruation. Young men competed for these flowers. Receiving red flowers from a young lady was interpreted as a clear sign of consent, leading to the exchange of rings. Dissatisfied suitors, on the other hand, displayed their anger by trotting on the respective girl's garden. This symbolic rape caused deep shame and pain to young women, and sometimes even led to family feuds. Today, the situation is reversed and young suitors offer flowers to the girls. Many girls, however, still keep floral gardens.

It is quite easy to establish whether the garden belongs to a younger or an older woman. As the woman matures, especially when she marries and has children, vegetables displace flowers. Thus, the presence of Baba Vanga in her garden was rather unusual. She was a woman in her late eighties amid local and exotic flowers; she was an old woman in a maiden's garden.

Baba Vanga's house is rather small. All visitors noticed that it was extremely clean and orderly, as any exemplary house should be kept. Her family members, neighbors and pilgrims have often mentioned how impressed they were by the fact that such an extraordinary person never neglected her household tasks, in all periods of her life.³ Although ordinary visitors were allowed only to a small parlor near the entrance, the inside of the house was well known to all, since several relatives,

² Some vegetables are conserved in jars for the winter.

³ Krasimira Stoianova, "Istinata za Vanga," Sofia, Balgarski Pisatel, 1996, p. 46, 64; henceforth Stoianova 1996.

neighbors and friends shared their impressions with numerous pilgrims. Also, the house was filmed in several documentaries broadcast on national television. One documentary focused on Baba Vanga's attraction to white. Apparently, her bedroom was decorated in all white. This detail is widely known among the pilgrims. Another detail that surfaced in an interview for national television and consequently became well known was Baba Vanga's fondness for puppets. She had an impressive puppet collection. Her sister claimed that Vanga, even in her old age, enjoyed playing with puppets—talking to them and spending time in their company. She even discussed her work with the puppets. Another unusual characteristic was Vanga's use of language. She sometimes used diminutives when referring to herself. For example, she spoke of her “small hands,” her “small shirt,” or her “small underpants.” In Bulgaria these terms are normally reserved for a prepubescent child.

This simultaneous display of signs, normally associated with different female ages and roles - child, maiden, mother and old woman - made a considerable impression on the pilgrims, who often debate its apparent inconsistency. Discussions sometimes evolve into speculations that touch upon strictly private issues, for example, whether Vanga had crossed the frontier between maidenhood and womanhood after her marriage. In Bulgaria topics concerning private matters are rarely discussed in public; actually this is the only case I know of. Thus, the fact that Vanga's personal matters were often discussed among the folk proves how affected they were by these contradictory signs she displayed.

According to her sister, Baba Vanga remained “a maiden, a child” during her entire life. In a documentary filmed in 1974, the sister explained how pure Vanga had been even after her marriage. The background shots of Vanga's white bedroom and the puppet collection visually confirmed her words. Pilgrims also mention that Vanga ate separately from the rest of her family, presumably “clean” vegetarian meals. According to her late husband's relatives, Vanga was “a wife exemplary in all respects.” During my fieldwork in Rupite, several pilgrims expressed the same opinion. On the other hand, there were rumors that Vanga might not have remained pure. When comparing Baba Vanga to another local saint, St. Stoina, people would point out that the latter “was a maiden,” unlike Vanga.⁴ Also, Vanga's closest friend claimed that Vanga had “fulfilled her marital duty, but only once, immediately after the marriage,” and thus became a real wife. Baba Vanga did not comment on

⁴ Valentina Izmirlieva, Petko Ivanov, “Sushishkata svetica Stojna. 1. Zitie”, in: “Balgarski folklor”, XVI, (1990), 3, 75 - 94

this issue. Instead, she would say, “How do they dare? Who do they think I am? Why do they want to know what I did in my own bed with my husband, my deceased husband?”⁵ Nevertheless, pilgrims continued discussing this matter in subdued voices, with distant allusions and glances both discreet and eloquent. Such reaction embodied the uneasiness some visitors felt at the display of contradictory signs simultaneously depicting a maiden, a mother and an old woman.

Combining signs belonging to different female ages was a constant feature of Vanga’s image. Her sister recalls that since the age of three, Vanga tried performing house chores as an adult woman, as a housewife.⁶ Those were probably childish games, but they received a new significance twelve years later, when both Vanga’s mother and stepmother died shortly one after another. At 15, Vanga became the oldest woman in the family. She was “as a mother” to her younger sister and bothers; sometimes they even called her “mother.” Vanga also began to dress differently from her peers at that time. Her niece explained that the family was apparently very poor and received charity. Through one traditional charity, Vanga received clothes belonging to deceased women.⁷ Since the deceased were mostly old, the girl dressed as an old woman.

Also at this time, Vanga began teaching village girls crafts, which she learned in a Serbian State pension for the blind where she had spent a couple of years. Vanga could sew, knit and embroider,⁸ and taught the other girls new, modern fashions and knitting patterns. Teaching girls these arts is part of women’s initiation in Bulgarian culture.⁹ Middle-aged women, who transfer these skills to the younger generation, usually supervise it. In Vanga’s village, however, this tradition was transmitted by a young girl in old woman’s clothes, whom her brothers and sisters called “mother.”

In addition to accumulating signs belonging to different age groups, Vanga would introduce new signs to counterbalance some changes in her life. For example, she developed a taste for white clothes, usually associated with maidenhood,

⁵ Liuben Georgiev, “Sreshti s Vangia,” Sofia, Knigo-tsviat, 1996:48; henceforth Georgiev 1996.

⁶ Stoianova 1996: 39.

⁷ Stoianova 1996:46.

⁸ cf. Stoianova 1996: 44.

⁹ cf. Yvonne Verdier, “Facons de dire, facons de faire: la laveuse, la couturiere, la cuisiniere,” Paris, Gallimard; henceforth Verdier 1979.

after her marriage. The attraction to puppets also came later in life, when she was in her mid-thirties at the earliest.

In Bulgarian traditional culture, as in other European cultures,¹⁰ specific female age groups are strictly differentiated. The boundaries are clear and generally observed. Women of different ages, for example, dress, talk and behave in a manner distinct for that group. Each group is assigned specific tasks, duties and privileges within the household and in the community. Consumption and speech patterns recommended for one age are considered utterly inappropriate for another. Initiation to a new age group creates a new personality, culminating in the attribution of a new name. Thus, in some Bulgarian regions the newly married wife would leave her given name and adopt her husband's name.¹¹ This classification system is central for the structure of Bulgarian traditional society. In several respects, it continues to be relevant for modern European societies as well.¹²

Production of the sacred: crossing the boundaries between age groups

The very existence of such rigid classification invites further symbolic operations. As Mary Douglas argued in her famous essay "Purity and Danger," objects transgressing symbolic boundaries laid by strict classification systems are often considered sacred.¹³ In a more recent development of this hypothesis, Jean-Pierre Albert demonstrated that this mechanism could also be used to produce sacrality, not just to classify an object as sacral.¹⁴

In Bulgarian mythology, several powerful figures have the ability to cross the frontier between different female age groups. "Samodivi" and St. Petka Paraskiva are such two figures. "Samodivi" are fairies who live in peripheral areas such as mountains and wild forest, that is "on the edge of the world." They can also be found in springs, wells or waterfalls, especially at twilight. They are supposed to be

¹⁰ cf. Verdier 1979; Yvonne Verdier, "Le Petit chaperon rouge dans la tradition orale," in: *Le Debat*, 3, 1980, 31-56; henceforth Verdier 1980.

¹¹ e.g. a certain Maria after marrying Ivan would become Ivanitsa, "she who belongs to Ivan."

¹² Mary Douglas, "The Uses of Vulgarity: A French Reading of Little Red Riding Hood," in: Mary Douglas, "Thought Styles. Critical Essays on Good Taste," SAGE, London, 1 - 20; henceforth Douglas 1996.

¹³ Mary Douglas, "Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo", London, Routledge, 1966; henceforth Douglas 1966.

¹⁴ Jean-Pierre Albert, "Le Sang et le Ciel. Les saintes mystiques dans le monde chretien". Aubier. Collection Historique, 1997

very beautiful, unpredictable and temptingly free. Most typically they manifest themselves in sudden tornadoes—a sudden movement of the most unstable element, the air. According to Bulgarian mythology, “samodivi” form a specific society. They have children, but no families. Possessing a rather aggressive sexuality, they occasionally kidnap young males, but never marry them. They can renew their virginity by taking a bath in their springs. Thus, “samodivi” are maidens who have children and take lovers, and form families of mothers, daughters and sisters. According to the local mythology, they occasionally “take in” new members or some women succumb to the temptation to join their society by dying or “losing one’s mind.” This temptation is especially strong during the period of change—from maiden to mother or grandmother. Obviously, the local people did not accept the boundaries among the age groups without reservation.

Supposedly, Vanga had an encounter with samodivi when she was 12. On her way to an isolated well a couple of kilometers away from her village, an ideal location for samodivi, Vanga was caught in a huge tornado, which dropped her a couple of kilometers away. Local people call such persons “taken by samodivi” and believe that they belong to samodivi from then on. According to the folklore, even an object taken by a tornado, especially a piece of female clothing should not be used any more because it belongs to the samodivi. As previously mentioned, a woman taken by the samodivi is expected to join their society either by dying or by losing her mind. Vanga was also expected to die, but she survived. Later she referred to the samodivi as “the jealous ones,” and warned young girls not to appear too joyful at places inhabited by them because they envy other people’s happiness. Nonetheless, owing to this experience, Vanga had gradually lost her sight and at 14 was blind.

The guardian of age groups’ boundaries

St. Paraskiva, also called Petka, St. Friday, or “the Black one,” is another figure in Bulgarian mythology that can cross the fault-lines between different ages. She is much more powerful and sinister than the samodivi. St. Paraskiva is the second most venerated woman after the Virgin Mary in the area stretching from Greece to Russia, including Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia. In the border area between Bulgaria, Macedonia and Greece, where Vanga was born, there exist some additional specific influences from Greece. Here St. Paraskiva is credited with the ability to cure eyes and blind persons address their prayers primarily to St. Petka-Paraskiva. She is traditionally represented in icons with her eyes on a tray.

In southwestern Bulgaria, however, St. Petka "The Black One" is more popular as a punishing saint than as a healer. Mostly married women venerate her and she maintains close relations with them. A specific ritual called "Kokosha cherkva" or "Hen's Church" is performed in her honor. It is celebrated in the autumn on the last Saturday before October 14, which is the official holiday of St. Petka.¹⁵ Only married women are allowed to participate in this ritual, in which they sacrifice a black hen at the outskirts of the village. Participation of maidens is strictly forbidden. An important part of her cult consists of a host of prohibitions concerning chores, which are typically associated with married women. For example, it is forbidden to spin wool, to weave and to sew¹⁶ for 12 consecutive Fridays.¹⁷

Womens' relations to St. Petka are quite complex. Young and middle-aged married women consider St. Petka to be one of the most feared saints. They fear St. Petka because she occasionally punishes the guilty through their children, especially small children. On the other hand, families frequently chose St. Petka to be their particular protector and patron.¹⁸ They entrust her with the well being of "the family, the kin, the house and the household."¹⁹ In some localities, her day of October 14 is chosen for the "sgledno khoro,"²⁰ which marks the beginning of folk dances where girls of marital age are displayed on the bridal market for the first time. Two weeks later is the day of St. Dimitar, whom local songs call a "nephew" of St. Petka.²¹ St. Dimitar day is considered the optimal date for marriage.

Despite her privileged relations with marriage, family and married women, St. Petka, by definition, is a maiden saint. The first miracle of St. Petka-Paraskiva of Epivatos²² is related to her virginity: when the citizens of Epivatos tried to bury a sailor in the same grave as she was buried, she revealed her sainthood and threatened the town. In icons, St. Petka is usually portrayed alone, dressed in black as a nun. There are exceptions where she is depicted with the popular folk saint St.

¹⁵ Rachko Popov, "Svettsi bliznatsi v bulgarskia naroden kalendar", Sofia, BAN, 1991, pp. 137-139.

¹⁶ Popov 1991: 121.

¹⁷ In Bulgarian as well as in the Russian and Greek languages the name of the saint is related to that day.

¹⁸ Popov 1991: 133-135.

¹⁹ Popov 1991:135.

²⁰ Popov 1991: 140.

²¹ Popov 1991: 132.

²² The most venerated in Bulgaria, to whom other homonymous saints are assimilated.

Nedelia, or St. Sunday, supposedly her sister. St. Petka, however, is never shown with a man or a child. As a childless saint focused on the family, St. Petka is believed to be jealous, envying other women's children. According to some beliefs, she deals with the souls of children who died unbaptized and stayed around her.²³ These souls cannot go either to hell or to paradise. Since the Eastern Orthodox religion has no concept of Purgatory, St. Petka has become the protector of that area between Paradise and Hell, where the souls of unbaptized children go. A folk song situates St. Petka at the bridge linking this world with the outer one. Like Vanga's house with the springs supposedly from the Hell and the Heaven on her left and her right, St. Petka's home is midway between the two worlds, connecting them.

In some Bulgarian regions, St. Petka is also considered "the mistress of the winds."²⁴ Taking into account her special relation to eyes and blindness, it is not difficult to connect this quick-tempered saint with the tornado, which caused Vanga's blindness.

To sum up, in Bulgarian popular religion married women enjoy difficult but privileged relations with St. Petka. Her demands are not easy to meet, but she protects mothers and could be trusted to punish any transgressor. In other words, clothing, behavior, domestic tasks and roles that Vanga constantly mixed, distinguish each age group, as well as duties and privileges associated with that age. In this respect, Vanga's display of different signs could be interpreted as a usurpation of prerogatives belonging to another group; a challenge to the age group of her mother, the same group protected by St. Petka.

Yvonne Verdier, in a series of rich and original texts, analyzed the delicate set of jealousies and rivalries, which underlie the strict separation of female age groups.²⁵ In traditional European cultures, a principal issue regarding women's initiation is the need to convey the rule that there is only one mother in the nuclear family. A young girl reaching puberty should either compete for the role with the older woman or should leave the family and, after some difficulties narrated in different fairy tales, establish one of her own.²⁶ In this context, a young girl adopting an older woman's role is seen as a challenger, a daughter pretending for her mother's position. This competition makes her an obvious target for the intervention of St. Petka-Paraskiva. Moreover, it is interesting to note in this context, that Vanga's de-

²³ Popov 1991: 136.

²⁴ Popov 1991: 45.

²⁵ Verdier 1979, 1980.

²⁶ And would be expelled; it is at that stage that the figure of the evil step-mother appears.

ceased mother was named Paraskiva. Thus, the woman whose position was challenged and the saint who supposedly punished the offender had the same name.

Negotiating the boundaries: Vanga and Dimitar

It is difficult to establish when Vanga started her own cult of St. Petka. The first undisputed date is 1941. Vanga was 30 years old, blind and unmarried. She lived alone with her sister. Her father had died long ago and her brothers worked at local farms. One night a “tall, blond and divinely handsome man” clad in antique armor on a white horse, appeared to Vanga. He promised her protection and a great future. Her sister Liuba, who was in the same room, did not notice the knight.²⁷ Two personalities from local mythology fit the description of the knight—St. George or St. Dimitar. Both are presented in icons as handsome soldiers mounted on a horse. As already mentioned, St. Dimitar is thought to be related to St. Petka.

Vanga had encountered a certain Dimitar when she was 15. She met him in the state pension for the blind and fell in love. But they had to separate and Vanga returned to her family. He was the first male figure who appeared in her biography as the miraculous vision of 1941.

Vanga got married two years later. At 32, nobody had expected her to marry. She was considered an old spinster in the region where women married in their teens. Also, she was blind and not particularly pretty. According to her niece and biographer, Krasimira Stoianova, it was love at first sight. The husband-to-be came to consult her on some private issue. He was much younger and was already betrothed. However, only a couple of weeks after he met Vanga, they got married. His name was Dimitar. As already mentioned, the exact nature of their marital relationship invited many speculations. The more venerated the prophet became, the more uneasy people felt about the husband’s existence, and the more persistent the rumor grew that it was a “clean” marriage. This Dimitar is not considered a significant figure. He was addicted to alcohol and died in the 1960s.

Speculations about the nature of their marriage were fueled by the additional fact that she had borne no children. Her sister Liuba tried consoling Vanga by naming her first son Dimitar, which was Vanga’s favorite male name. Then, a couple of years later, Vanga adopted a boy, whose name was also Dimitar. Much later, when she became one of the most venerated personalities in Bulgaria and a foundation was established under her auspices, she made another Dimitar its president. Ac-

²⁷ Stoianova 1996: 56.

According to some estimates, Vanga had some 8,000 godchildren. Considering that her favorite name was Dimitar, she became a symbolic mother to several hundred Dimitars. This fascination with the name Dimitar lasted until the end of her life. Her last wish was that eight men named Dimitar carry her coffin. All these episodes illustrate that Vanga played with different types of relations with (St.) Dimitar—from first innocent love to marriage, motherhood and, finally, to last support.

Shifting between different female ages and roles invited serious reflection on female relationships with the men in their family. Vanga had displayed all imaginable relationships with the emblematic "Dimitar." Except for the dream encounter with the saint, it is obvious who the principal figure in these relations was. Vanga was the constant, while different "Dimitars" emerged around her and subsequently disappeared. She represented a woman who did not change regardless of her ties with Dimitar.

Becoming St. Petka

Since the late 1950s, sound evidence exists that Vanga developed strong devotion to St. Petka. Vanga's own popularity was also growing and dozens of women began visiting her every day. In 1967, she received an official recognition and was appointed a research fellow at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. A municipal clerk was hired to keep track of visitors and charge them a state-approved fee. By the mid-1970s, Vanga became very popular among some prominent intellectuals, including a minister of culture and a minister of education. She was venerated also by Liudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov. Many Mercedes belonging to Bulgarian and foreign dignitaries started appearing in Rupite.

The core of Vanga's followers, however, remained middle-aged women who formed long, patient queues in front of Vanga's house. They always asked the same questions about their family's well being, about a husband's or children's illness, or about a deceased parent, husband or child. Vanga was reputed for being able to speak with the dead. Messenger of the dead is a quite common figure in Bulgarian tradition. Since the Orthodox religion lacks the concept of Purgatory and few people are either so good or so bad to go directly to their final destination; they supposedly wander for some time before moving on. Messengers carry their wishes to the living, and the living parents and children have to help them reach final peace. The wishes and preoccupations of the deceased that Vanga transmitted always focused on their families. The dead asked questions about their relatives and worried

about the living's well being. They also offered advice about whom the daughter should marry and where the house needs repair.

In addition to the information concerning the dead, pilgrims often sought Vanga's advice on health and illness. She recommended remedies and offered explanation why a particular illness affected a particular person. The explanation was usually a moral one: the illness was punishment for some sin. Since women predominately asked about their children's ailments, Vanga usually offered as a reason some sin of their parents. It was never a sin of a husband or a wife, but a sin of another ancestor further down the line. According to Vanga, a child is often punished for his parents' or grandparents' sins. "Because it causes them more pain," Vanga would say. This type of theodicy is well known in the Christian religion, and can be found in the Old Testament. In Bulgarian popular religion, as already mentioned, this action is often associated with St. Petka, who punishes women through their children.

Vanga not only offered that type of explanation, but also acted in a similar manner. For example, when a police sergeant came to arrest her under the orders of the municipal committee of Bulgarian Communist Party, she informed him that his children had just fallen in a hole full of lime. The police sergeant hurried home and saved his children in the last instant, but the story spread and no local policeman dared to touch Vanga since.

Vanga's mediation with heaven was constructed occasionally along the same lines as her punishment: it followed family relations. When a child was seriously ill or was considered doomed since birth because of a sin pending upon his family, Vanga offered to become his godmother. She called such persons her children and all of them reportedly enjoyed good health. Adopting them into her family, Vanga guaranteed their well being and settled their accounts with Heaven.

Overall, in different ways and with different tools Vanga told other women that family is most important; it was only concerning the person, male or female, since his/her death and the ways Heaven distributed justice that followed the family relations, the lines of direct descendants. The fact that Divine intervention recognized the parent-child relationship was the ultimate recognition of its existence and importance. Hardly a stronger legitimization of reality and efficacy of the bond between parents and children could be imagined than the claim that Divine Justice itself had chosen to act through them.

In Vanga's interventions, salvation followed the same track as punishment. By joining the family of the saintly woman and by becoming her godchild were the sins committed by parents absolved. Vanga would revert to this act only when all the other means, such as Church, prayers, doctors, and hospitals had proven ineffi-

cient. The new family bonds were the only instruments that could override the old; thus joining the new family saved godchildren from sins of their natural parents. Family is at the core of Vanga's management of the supernatural, and her repeated proclamations that "the family—this is the woman, the mother" become essential when placed in this context. Through her mediations with the dead, her healings and her theodicy, the followers understood how important the role of the person to whom the children are entrusted was. It was the only thing that mattered to the deceased in their afterlife and it was the principal thing that the Almighty considered when distributing His Justice. Vanga interpreted that message through punishment and salvation, just like St. Petka. Maybe that is why, even when the authorities persecuted her in the 1940s and 1950s, the number of her middle-aged women followers never diminished.

Vanga's messages about family and female age groups and roles were conveyed during a period of dramatic transformation in Bulgarian family structures. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, young Bulgarians were raised by their grandmothers, not by the mothers as was the case prior to the 1950s. A new pattern in child rearing was established where middle-aged women took care of their daughters' children. This allowed younger women to dedicate themselves to work. Consequently, women reconsidered their relations and views towards career, children and motherhood.

Vanga's existence conveyed a fascinating message to both younger and older women. She was there and was undoubtedly blessed by Heaven. According to local people, she could appear as a maiden, a mother and an old woman, just like St. Petka. This was an extremely disturbing message, as it upset the traditional classification of female roles and the accompanying beliefs. Vanga's messages implied that it was not necessary for mothers and daughters to compete inside the family. It offered a truce that could be achieved by focusing on the children; children being the only relation that transcend death and are respected by Divine Justice. Through her different relations with multiple Dimitars, Vanga also showed that a woman could preserve her identity irrespective of her relations with the men in the family,

Hundreds of thousands of women venerated Vanga because her messages offered important insight and explanations about the disruptive changes around them. By the end of her life, many people considered Vanga to be a saint, despite the objections of the Orthodox Church. The culminating point of her cult was in the 1990s when Vanga launched a nation-wide campaign to construct a church devoted to St. Petka. The money was raised very quickly. On October 14, 1994, some 15,000 persons from all regions of Bulgaria, Northern Greece and Macedonia gathered in Rupite to consecrate of the church. On this occasion, several pilgrims discussed the

connection between Vanga and St. Petka. There were two principal theories. According to the first, Vanga was St. Petka's daughter. It did not matter that St. Petka was a virgin and a nun. Pilgrims stipulated that a link between the prophet and the saint must exist because of the similarities between the two. They considered the link to be consistent with Vanga's messages about family relations. This belief brilliantly reconciled Vanga's blindness with the saint who controls sight; the young girl whose family called her "mother" with older women.

Other pilgrims claimed that Vanga was St. Petka herself, reborn and returning to earth to save her people. In one widespread version, Vanga decided to sacrifice herself to stop the war in the former Yugoslavia and to prevent it from spreading to Macedonia and Bulgaria.²⁸

The two versions are not necessarily contradictory. Rather, they are a testimony that Vanga achieved the impossible. She was both a mother and a daughter. She was forgiven by the terrible saint who guards the boundaries between the age groups. She symbolized the renegotiated relations between mothers and daughters.

²⁸ The Dayton agreement was interpreted as a confirmation of the efficiency of Vanga's intervention.