

Establishment, Specifics and Development of the Chitalishte Institution during the Bulgarian Nation-Building Period

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Establishment, specifics and development of the *chitalishte* during the Bulgarian nation-building period¹

Powstanie, specyfika i rozwój instytucji *czitaliszte* w okresie budowania narodu bułgarskiego

Abstract

By the mid-1850s the Bulgarian *chitalishte* had established its characteristic features: local character, complex functions and autonomous form of self-management. The article aims at achieving a deeper understanding of the reasons, characteristic features and development of the Bulgarian *chitalishte* institution, as well as of its embedding in the local, initially urban, communities with their activities related to the preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage. By the mid-1850s the Bulgarian *chitalishte* had established its characteristic features: local character, complex functions and autonomous form of self-management. The author focusses her attention both on the overall context of the Bulgarian nation building period and on the micro-environments of the local communities, where the *chitalishtes* were created and developing as specific cultural and educational centers.

Keywords: *chitalishte*, local community, cultural heritage

Abstrakt

Artykuł ma na celu głębsze zrozumienie przyczyn, charakterystycznych cech i rozwoju bułgarskiej instytucji *czitaliszte*, a także jej osadzenia w lokalnych, początkowo miejskich, społecznościach z ich działaniami związanymi z zachowaniem i ochroną dziedzictwa kulturowego. Do połowy lat pięćdziesiątych XIX wieku bułgarski zwyczaj *czitaliszte* zyskał swoje charakterystyczne cechy: lokalny charakter, złożone funkcje i autonomiczną formę samorządzenia. Autorka skupia swoją uwagę zarówno na ogólnym kontekście bułgarskiego okresu budowania narodu, jak i na mikrośrodowiskach lokalnych społeczności, w których *czitaliszte* powstawały i rozwijały się jako specyficzne centra kulturalne i edukacyjne.

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Słowa kluczowe: *czitaliszte*, społeczność lokalna, dziedzictwo kulturowe

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Introduction

This article is part of a bigger study dedicated to the *chitalishte* institution, as well as to the local communities and their folklore. The present text aims at the representation and analysis of the first activities of the Bulgarian *chitalishtes* in the first years of their development, i.e. in 1860s and 1870s. Special attention is paid to the factors that brought about the establishment of these institutions and to the main characteristic features they possessed – their community nature, civic model of self-regulation, and complex activities. The role of the *chitalishtes* for the mass education, modernization and national consolidation is also outlined, together with the efforts to safeguard folk cultural heritage. The outlining of the specifics of the *chitalishte*, as well as of the factors for its establishment and the basic characteristics and mechanisms of its functioning, are the basis for the critical theoretical discussion of certain statements in the works by Anderson (1991), Smith (1991), Herzfeld (1997), Assman (2001), Gellner (2008) and Burke (2009).

The problem for the re-structuring of the public sphere in some of the West European countries, which is central for Habermas (1995), actually brought some cultural, educational, modernizing and nation-building institutions to the fore in 18th and 19th century: for example, the public libraries, the subscriber bookshops, reading circles, seminars, etc. The article offers the opportunity to point out the similarities and differences of these processes in Bulgaria. The author also takes into consideration the influence of the nearby Slavic and Balkan nations and cultures as far as the establishment of the first *chitalishtes* is concerned.

Secondary sources on which the article is based include historiographic literature (Obretenov 1970, Drinov 1911, Chilingirov 1930, Daskalova 1999, Kondarev, Sirakov and Cholov 1972, etc.), museological (Nedkov 2006, Radonov 1972), culturological and folkloristic ones (Dinekov 1980, Zhivkov 1977, Dechev 2010, etc.)

The example of the Others – from organized practices of public reading to *chitalishtes*

Unique in the national context, the Bulgarian *chitalishtes* follow the ideas for the organization of similar and earlier institutions in Western and South-Eastern Europe. Even more than that, *chitalishte* founders and activists in Bulgaria themselves emphasized the positive experience of the Others in this respect and declared that they were

following these foreign examples when clarifying the need for the creation of a particular *chitalishte* or its conceptual design. The strong influence of the foreign examples – and especially those in the Slavic world and in some countries of South-Eastern Europe (Slovenian, Czech, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian *matica*, Serbian *čitaonica*, Greek *συνλογία*),² as well as the civil model of German readers societies, the French literary salons and subscriber bookshops widespread in Western Europe, or the British public libraries³ – is profound in the Bulgarian context. Nevertheless, when adopted in Bulgaria, foreign models acquired specific characteristics and individual development in the local milieu.

Through the 19th century new socio-cultural conditions were already existent in the large Bulgarian towns of Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Varna, Rousse, Lom, Svishtov, Shumen, Gabrovo, Sliven, as well as in the fast-growing small towns in the outskirts of the Balkan Mountains range. These changes affected certain communities that began self-differentiating, self-distinguishing and self-identifying themselves. For example, a large part of the Bulgarian population within the particular towns started to self-identify quite distinctly on the basis of ethnicity, educational level and professional affiliation. The emerging new urban public cultures were more or less independent from the preceding “old”, “rural” culture, even though the urban environment did not change suddenly and completely. In the middle of the 19th century a considerable part of the population in the villages, but also in the cities, was living more or less within their syncretic traditional culture, satisfying their basic cultural needs by means of folklore (Zhivkov 1977: 13). Nevertheless, in the nation-building period the towns became more open in nature, thus embracing the specific plurality of the traditional and the modern, the old and the new, the rural and the urban.

Except for the new socio-cultural conditions and the developing consciousness of “us” and “the Others”, an important factor for the emergence of the *chitalishtes* was the overall proliferation of literacy and of the culture of the written word. In Bulgaria, the public sphere was initially the privilege of the highly educated wealthy strata of

² All those institutions were created and developed by the Central European and South-East European peoples under the influence of Romanticism and nation-building movements in Western Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. Beside their specific features, their general driving forces were cultural and educative, giving way to public organizations involved in enlightenment and publishing, including active efforts for collecting, publishing, exploring and exposing remnants from ancient times (Kerimova 2011: 119–136; Ličen 2017: 35–54).

³ These institutions were the result of multiple transformations in England, France and Germany in late 18th and early 19th century when the world saw the first centers of literary publicity – the cafes in the time of their boom between 1680 and 1730 in England and the salons in France in the period between the Regency and the Revolution (Habermas 1995: 92–95). The establishment of the new cultural and educational institutions almost without exception was done in an atmosphere of openness, public accessibility, and proliferation of education, at the same time mastering the rational knowledge and cultural benefits, which were perceived not as a privilege for certain aristocratic circles but as a right of all citizens (Habermas 1995).

the urban society (quite like in Western European societies, as identified by Jurgen Habermas; Habermas 1995). Gradually, during the popular domestic gatherings in the beginning of the 19th century the literate family members – most often the father, one of the sons or one of the grandchildren – used to read aloud to neighbors, relatives, or to a circle of friends (Daskalova 1999: 150–151). At the same time, a significant part of the local communities in the villages and in the towns was still illiterate. The oral mode – speech – was the only form of communication for them. These situations could in fact quite well be characterized by what Paul Zumthor wrote about the reception of the printed word by readers in generally illiterate societies: the need for a transitional, intermediate stage at which the written text is “brought” into this environment by means of its audio perception in relevance with the particular audience (Zumthor 1992: 32–33).

The enlightenment ideas, which after the mid-1840s were gaining increasing popularity in Bulgaria, pointed to a need for a specialized institution whose main objective would be disseminating and providing access to printed works (school literature, press, books), thus encouraging curiosity and cultivating reading habits. Since then, the first reading rooms at the schools⁴ (the so-called “common rooms”), but also “bookstores”, “*chitalishte* rooms”, “*chitalishte*”⁵ were established both in the flourishing towns in the outskirts of the Balkan Mountains range and in the large towns, these common rooms and bookstores being the earliest predecessors of the *chitalishte* institution. Despite the functional and lexical similarity, their forms were not community-centered yet. They offered quite a narrow number of activities and did not have the “complex character and multilateral activity, going far beyond the reading room and the public library” (Sirakov 1965: 44)

Community model and institutional development of a *chitalishte*

The first three *chitalishte*s shared common features, although founded independently in 1856 – respectively in the towns of Svishtov (on May 30, with the name “Tri Svetiteli” [Three Holy Hierarchs]), Lom (on 23 April, with the name “Postojanstvo” [Persistence]) and Shumen (in May or June of the same year, with the name “Sveti Arhangel Mihail” [Holy Archangel Michael]). The procedures of their establishing and the principles of their functioning, as well as the ideas of their founders, activists and the local communities, were aimed at creating a brand-new cultural and educational institution, completely independent from the pre-existing ones. In the founding protocols, in the records from those times, in the periodicals, the distinctive group of *chitalishte* founders, donors and members could be outlined as an encyclopedic figure from that

⁴ The different forms were introduced in the schools in 1843. Until then the children were taught according to the Bell-Lancaster method.

⁵ The earliest considered to be the “common room” established at the school in Tryavna in 1847 and the *chitalishte* in Lom established in 1848.

period with a background as a teacher, a man of letters, a reporter, a public figure, or an artist. This figure was at the center of the formation of the *chitalishte* institution, working there together with the representatives of wealthy traders and the families of craftsmen in the village. All these, in most of the cases, were also members of the local municipality and the local school boards, or ecclesiastical Orthodox episcopates, representatives of the Bulgarian population in the Ottoman administrative *vilayet* courts, as well as initiators and sponsors of various local cultural and educational initiatives. In addition, there were almost no members of the economic, political and intellectual elite at that time who were not involved in the *chitalishte* institution. They all put their efforts, resources and labor in it, and paid attention to the possibilities which it could provide in the ongoing nation-constitutive, modernization and enlightenment processes.

If considered in the conceptual framework of Anthony Smith (Smith 1991), *chitalishte* visualizes the so-called “vertical” model, where the national formation is only indirectly influenced by the bureaucratic state.⁶ In the Bulgarian context, due to the absence of an independent state, the emerging elite had the understanding of education and culture as autonomous spheres and began to purposefully displace their management in specialized institutions (Smith 1991: 161–166). The establishment of *chitalishtes* was a novelty not as much because of the phenomena they introduced (enlightenment practices, forms of public communication, models of European art, etc.) which had entered the urban communities through many other channels and mechanisms, but because of the institutional understanding of the process. Due to the lack of a systematic and purposeful state policy providing for the development of the spheres of education, culture, science, etc., and due to their still undifferentiated nature in the period, those functions were focused in the unified space of the complex cultural-educational centers.

Another important feature that must be highlighted is that *chitalishtes* were established as an initiative of the emerging elites, but were further run with the resources of the particular local Bulgarian communities. As important as the leading role of the elite, the pattern of establishment of the *chitalishtes* as an institutional model, was a clear striving to catalyze the internal energy of the Bulgarian communities, turning them from passive ones into ones involved in the management of their socio-cultural environment.

In the community environment, a *chitalishte* was a new institutional form, where the guiding principle was that of autonomy and community self-government. According to the *chitalishtes*' regulations such as statutes and ordinances, this specific institution was a membership organization in which all members were absolutely equal, although distinguished according to the funds provided, the degree of involvement in the

⁶ Anthony Smith introduces the distinction between two types of *ethnie* – “lateral”, i.e. based on the principle of bureaucratic inclusion (Smith 1991: 78–84); and “vertical” or ethnic, which Smith describes as “more naïve” (Smith 1991: 87–94).

activities and the internal order of the institution. In principle, *chitalishtes* were a kind of community unification with clear visibility in its principles of election, accountability and self-control. The decisions concerning the financial support, as well as the activities performed, were decided with a majority by the General Assembly including all *chitalishte* members. In the Board of Trustees, consisting of a chairman and some members elected by the General Assembly, the entire community pointed out its representatives by delegating leadership functions to them, while the Board assumed the responsibility to develop the organization and ensure the progress of its cultural and educational mission.

These details defining the existence of the *chitalishte* institution were its immanent characteristics. They were also the object to coordination with the other institutions existing in the socio-cultural context of the local community – local municipalities, church and school boards of trustees, the guild associations. As one of those, *chitalishtes* had an extremely important place in the local communities, as did the institutionalization of the other respective spheres: administrative management, religion, educational, production, culture, science, etc. In the nation-building period, they actually were the prototypes of the future state bodies and their institutional activity was aimed at modeling an imaginary Bulgarian statehood. The entire dynamics of *chitalishtes* together with the other structures was not the result of a strategy of the centralized state system that seeks to ensure the institutional implementation of its policy according to the territorial distribution of its population; it was, instead, a local initiative stemming from the conscious needs and the activity of the Bulgarian communities. *Chitalishtes* are determined as “political clubs” and as “true clubs of citizenship” (Chilingirov 1930: 669–670), “having a dual purpose: one of constantly engaging the mind of our public with useful topics, and the other – of accustoming our people to public life” (Danov 1968: 196).

During the Bulgarian nation-building period, the existence of the locally organized *chitalishtes* democratized the access to the benefits offered and, at the same time, focused at integrating the local communities into the processes of building standardized secular education and national culture. This brought about a wide dissemination of cultural and educational institutions in the villages. At the beginning, these dynamic processes were taking place in the towns. Thus, *chitalishtes* were initially an entirely urban phenomenon and none were created in the villages. Subsequently, in the 1860s, a lot of town *chitalishtes* geared the establishment of *chitalishtes* in the villages,⁷ so their number grew to 74 by 1878.

According to Veska Zhivkova, in that period *chitalishtes* were a trend in those villages which had “the most developed sociological structure, with a considerable degree

⁷ The first village *chitalishte* was founded in Smyadovo with the support of the *chitalishte* in the near town of Shumen in 1862. The *chitalishte* in the village of Ustovo was founded in 1866, while the *chitalishtes* in Adjar and Byala Cerkva – in 1868 and 1869 (Kondarev et al., 1972: 42–48).

of openness to other systems” (Zhivkova 1985: 165–166). They were similar to those in the towns and had led to significant changes in the traditional environment – the institutionalization of education in schools, an active echelon of the teachers working there, a social structure that showed a well-differentiated trade-craft group, extended contacts with the towns and their culture, a high degree of openness to the new means of communication – periodicals and literature, as well as reading and publishing practices or authorship (Zhivkova 1985: 160). Documentary archives show that the village *chitalishte* institution wholly borrowed the urban model of functioning. In many cases, these village *chitalishtes* displayed remarkable activity.⁸

On the other hand, the establishment of the *chitalishte* in Tsarigrad/Istanbul in 1866⁹ was motivated by the then pertinent needs of the Bulgarian colony in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. The new institution had a library, organized lectures, staged theater performances in the Osmani Theater and at the Teatro Frances (Harbova 2006: 25). According to research, however, the basic concept behind the occurrence of the *chitalishte* in Tsarigrad and its actual functioning was perceived by its contemporaries as a kind of Ministry of Enlightenment. It developed charity initiatives, gathered support for unification in the sphere of education, promoted publishing and dissemination of Bulgarian literature, and had an important role in the struggles for the independence of the Bulgarian Church. At the same time, it was a supra-local center which coordinated and supported the activities of all the *chitalishtes* and was a major factor in the building of the links between them (Harbova 2006: 90).¹⁰

The *chitalishte* as a cultural and educational institution preceded both the sociological structure of the future state system and that of the civil society. The latter can be seen in the local governance model that was followed, and in the efforts to create a vertical structure of the otherwise horizontally functioning *chitalishte*, corresponding to the typical national project of the “classic pyramid” (Gellner 2008).

Complex forms of activities

Most of the *chitalishte* activities had their early beginnings in the previous decades and some of them had already become durable elements in the socio-cultural context

⁸ A good example here is the *chitalishte* called “Selska Ljubov” (Village Love), which was established in 1869 in Byala Cerkva. For a short period of time, it helped to open a virgin school, gathered a collection of books, subscribed to newspapers and magazines, published and distributed two books and had theatrical activities (Kondarev et al. 1972: 48).

⁹ The very appearance of the *chitalishte* in Tsarigrad and the specialized periodical published there, the *Chitalishte* magazine (1870–1875), is remarkable; for more details, see Harbova 2006.

¹⁰ It had enlightenment tasks and offered its readers an encyclopedic range of themes as well as an opportunity to share experience. According to Elena Harbova, despite its short life, with its 100 books, more than 4,000 subscribers and a large number of sponsors, the magazine was one of the most popular editions in the Bulgarian nation-building period (Harbova 2006: 90).

of many Bulgarian settlements. *Chitalishtes* were indeed at the same time concentrated and institutionalized in a complex milieu. The mass literacy, literature and the activation of the widest circle of readers were expressed in the very term: the lexeme “*chitalishte*” has the same root as “to read”, “reader”, “reading room”, but also, in a symbolic sense, as a book open for reading is one of the most common symbols on *chitalishte* seals. Quite like in the case of the first reading rooms, common rooms and bookstores, the main activity of a *chitalishte* was also focused at maintaining a fund of books, but that was parallel with the striving for the institutionalization of this activity: the striving to create and maintain a library open to the public, to acquire the largest number of published books and periodicals (Kondarev et al., 1972: 108, 146–152). Most of the *chitalishte* libraries in the large towns were created by joining funds existing in the local schools and churches that were previously acquired through sponsorship, with financial resources and subscriptions by private persons (including wealthy Bulgarian émigrés as well as some foreigners) and organizations. A common phenomenon in the towns during the period under consideration were donations of private book collections. It was an expression of a new worldview that looked at the aspirations of the generation of intellectuals to “infuse” their personal collections into the public space and to “open” the way for their use by the local communities.¹¹ As a result of all those donor initiatives, a lot of book funds at urban *chitalishtes* had become impressive repositories of literature, quite remarkable for their amounts and content, while still at the early stages of their existence. As for the most preferred reading matter there, namely, Bulgarian and foreign periodicals, some of the urban *chitalishtes* continued to receive and preserve a large part of rare editions – collections of old printed books, valuable manuscripts, etc. – long after the Liberation.

Through the support of collective readership practices, the *chitalishtes* practically continued the enlightenment line that originated from the public town centers and from the first reading rooms. Events at *chitalishtes* did not differ significantly from collective readings that preceded them, which were held in pubs, cafes and shops as well as in common rooms and bookstores. Thus, this new cultural and educational institution inherited and absorbed the content of a niche that had already existed in the urban environment, but it differentiated, specialized and enriched it. Collective readership practices were already implemented not at spontaneous and informal gatherings in public places aimed at getting acquainted with the press and popular literature, but in a special institution. They had their potential in relatively new and equally communicative forms such as debates, lectures, discussions, Sunday schools for adults and illiterates (Daskalova 1999: 146–148). At the same time, they also acted as a driving

¹¹ All book lovers in Tryavna used to benefit from the library of Petko R. Slaveikov; Krastyu S. Pushurka donated part of his household library to the *chitalishte* in Lom, and Dr Ivan Seliminski – to the one in Sliven (see Lekov 1996: 53, 136–138).

force for turning the “humble and indifferent public, silently listening to several literate ‘authorities’ able to juggle with the text, into self-confident commentators and judges of the distant events and territories” (Daskalova 1999: 94; Lekov 1996: 91). Last but not least, the *chitalishte* forms allowed for a communication on an everyday basis, marked by the signs of the shared sense of closeness and mutual help among the people and accompanied by a feeling of belonging to a supra-local, national community.¹²

The *chitalishte* activities were basically realizing wide enlightenment goals as illustrated by the charity initiatives carried out during the Bulgarian nation-building period, namely to provide for the maintenance of poor students, to secure financial support for publishing activities, to enhance secular education on the territory of the respective settlement and its adjacent region, and to provide for the maintenance of the school system and for the harmonization of education programmes. This was inherently enlightening tendency corresponding directly to the efforts for an accelerated and purposeful admission of dialogue with the wider European culture and lifestyle, as well as with the attempts to self-define the Bulgarian culture as a nationwide one. With the whole set of specific forms of work, the cultural and educational institution of the *chitalishte* had the task of simultaneously modernizing and enlightening, but also of guiding the local communities with their regional differences towards the general framework of the national.

Both the complex functions of the *chitalishtes* and their specific institutional model of self-government led to the local communities and to the totally equal understanding of *chitalishtes* as the “specific islands of culture, bridges to Europe” where the “transition from traditional to modern society” was taking place, but also as “centers of Bulgarianness”, where connections with the roots and the past began to be considered as particularly significant (Gavrilova et al. 2000: 16, 21).

Cultural heritage and the *chitaliste*

In the field of nation building, where the phenomenon of the *chitalistes* belongs, the folk culture is seen as a resource for the creation of national identity (Smith 1991: 116, 126). Particularly in the Bulgarian conditions, the resource for national identity is visible not only in the common ethnic history, religion and language (Smith 1991: 94), but also in the “living traditions”, preserved as valuable heritage (Herzfeld 1997: 23–24, 43). In addition, due to the absence of institutional policy in the field of cultural and

¹² Nicola Obretenov’s memoirs indicate that in the 1870s the “Zora” Chitalishte at Rousse was situated in three rooms on the main street, which were left at its disposal by Angel Glagolizov (Obretenov 1970: 79). In the evening after work, and on every festive day or Sunday after the liturgy, the visitors (relatively wealthy *chorbaji* and town councilors, merchants and teachers with a taste for the novelties) gathered in the cafeteria that had been opened by the *chitalishte*, where lectures were delivered, Bulgarian books and newspapers were read aloud, and foreign editions were orally translated (Obretenov 1970: 79).

historical heritage (namely museums and archives), the *chitalishtes* played an important role in searching, collecting, preserving and (re)presenting material culture. The historiographic literature provides multiple examples of such *chitalishte* activities during the period of Bulgarian nation-building (Radonov 1972; Kondarev et al. 1972: 171; Nedkov 2006: 9–73; Harbova 2006: 73).

Initially, the interest was mainly connected to archaeological, numismatic and paleographic data, as well as with documentary artefacts from the period of the old Bulgarian statehood and from the culture of the Bulgarian Middle Ages (written monuments, printed books, manuscripts). The “Letter to the Bulgarian *chitalishtes*” changed their institutional activity towards folklore (Drinov 1911: 259–263). This letter was published in 1869 and the main idea was related to the codification of the new Bulgarian literary language. According to Marin Drinov, the new Bulgarian language was to include both the old language as preserved in the literature and the living “idioms and pronunciations”. “Rules for collecting songs and fairy tales” (Drinov 1911: 261) represented one of the first full and systematic programs for collecting folklore and ethnographic data. A significant number of *chitalishtes* started to collect such data in the villages and their surroundings. They collected songs, tales, legends, descriptions of customs, which were published in the *Chitalishte* magazine (Harbova 2006: 73, 90). At the same time, museums and exhibition played important role in preserving and representing the cultural heritage. The “Bulgarian National Exhibition”, organized and coordinated at the *chitalishte* in Tsarigrad in 1873, was the first large event showing Bulgarian traditional artefacts – household items, tools, agricultural implements, clothes, various fabrics, carpets, knitting (Nedkov 2006: 58).

The collection of folklore and ethnographic artefacts during the nation-building period was connected with the idea of achieving political independence, but also with the preservation of cultural heritage. These included codification of a literary language, as well as exhibiting historical, folkloristic or ethnographic traces (Chilingirov 1930: 65). The work of the *chitalishte* institutions was enhanced by some representatives of the political and intellectual elites who “discovered the past and the nation” following the example of European countries in the early nineteenth century. A *chitalishte* as a local community center promoted its attitude to cultural heritage.

Collection-building activities occurred only in those places where the communities, or their representatives, had absorbed the ideas for constructing the national and cultural heritage. This was the reason why such activities were conducted mainly in the strong urban *chitalishtes* and in large villages. In terms of their cultural backgrounds, *chitalishte* members (who were most often the local teacher and educated representatives of the local community) had moved quite away from traditional culture; although they had not completely lost their connections with it, they possessed written literature skills and represented the ideas of modernization and the development of national consolidation. The collection went together with the willingness to preserve folk heritage as

an artefact and to record, in writing, information about objects, songs, customs, tales, legends, etc., belonging to that heritage (Radonov 1972; Nedkov 2006: 58). The *chitalishte* activities among local communities in connection with their cultural heritage enabled the first significant folklore publications and editions to appear. These, in turn, were the earliest signal of the local awareness of the value of folklore and the need for its preservation and safeguarding.

Conclusion

In the nation-building period, the *chitalishte* institution worked towards education, modernization and national consolidation. Parallel with the growing of interest in folklore as “living antiquity”, it was also considered a valuable resource for the development of the new set of identities, typical for the modern times and for the formation of a nation. Thus, the *chitalishte* began also to invest efforts in its safeguarding. Being an important factor in this respect, the *chitalishtes* followed the romantic concepts for folklore and its safeguarding. As local institutions, they contributed successfully in numerous ways to these ends by collecting, writing down, describing, studying, promoting or exhibiting folk culture in its numerous local variants and in all its specific spheres. At the same time, the *chitalishtes* contributed to the adoption of folklore as a part of the new cultural reality, one dominated by the national project, by disseminating the understanding of folklore as an element of the country’s symbolic capital, as a museum exhibit, as a cultural product to be performed in front of a wide audience, etc.

Established as an institution relying on the self-initiative of the local population in the years of the Bulgarian nation-building, the *chitalishte* existed in the vast and dynamic space between the internal context of the local urban or, more rarely, village communities with their cultural policies. Thus, it began to be also conceptualized as a medium for the safeguarding of the various forms of cultural heritage, for its documenting and the preservation of its artefacts, as well as for enhancing the vitality of the living heritage (Santova, Nenova 2010: 25–35). Added to that was the *chitalishte*’s contribution to the understanding of folklore as an important marker for the national, but also for the local cultural specifics of the particular urban and village communities.

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