



Between Religion and Nation: The Identity of *Makedonci muslimani* in Republic of Macedonia

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Abstract

The collective identity of Muslim population with Slavic origin in the Balkans derived from late Ottoman millet system of confessional differences and the introduction of national ideology in second half of 19th century. With the formation of separate Macedonian statehood *Makedonci muslimani* were included into Macedonian nation, but in the same time, because of their religious differences they weren't fully incorporated as integral part of Christian dominated national discourse. This pattern is not specific only to the context of Republic of Macedonia, and similar patterns can be located in the examples of Muslims with Serbian national affiliations, of Bulgarian Pomaks. The group has stable cultural features, and clear presence of Macedonian language, but shows different politically determined affiliations in their national identification.

Keywords: Muslims; Macedonia; *Makedonci muslimani*; Balkan; Identity.

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1. Introduction

Nation's genesis becomes a fundamental element in its strengthening. Even if there is a fictive past, yet it must be real. This is the reason why the culture continuity is contingent and inessential [1]. Hence, the historical continuity needs to be invented, by creating an antique past that would overcome the effective historical continuity or through semi-fiction or falsification [2]. National thinkers attempt to provide an answer of the following questions: what is the nation's origin, what are the nation's diacritical features, who belongs and who doesn't and what is the future of the nation [3].

"Critical markers" such as religion, language and mutual territory does not denote one and the same identity. Therefore there must be a so-called "invention of the tradition", there must be a creation of "imaginative communities" and there must be "a basic invented myth". The group needs to own a mutual famous past, divine ancestors, and hard times in the past, etc. Smith does not argue on the significance of the relativistic position of the historical truth and even not about it being irrelevant for the national phenomenon. Clearly, the ability of the national historians to document fables and exploding unsatisfactory fictions is an important element within the sustainable relations amongst past, present and future, to which the national community is being based on [2]. As for Gellner, the high cultures strive to become the basis of the new nationality when right before the emerge of the nationalism, the religion was tightly defining each underprivileged as an opposite of the privileged ones especially even in times when the underprivileged haven't got other mutual positive feature (such as the mutual history) [4].

Within the context of the Balkan nationalism and the building of the collective national awareness, the key role goes to the educational institutions, which through their own curricula are reconstructing the vision for mutual past. In addition to that, the primordial aspect for the organic origin of the nation predominates almost universally, which is primarily based on ethno-linguistic traits of the group. Speaking of the Macedonian historiography, as for Brunbauer, the national discourse is determined by the primordial and essential approach that refers to the national and ethnical identity as something inherited and not a subject of change [3].

Late national projects as the formation of Macedonian, Turkish and Albanian identity in the late Ottoman era had influenced on collective identification of certain bordering groups of Slavs with Muslim religion. On wider Balkan level some of them created separate national entities - The Boshnjacs (or Muslims in Bosnia and Hercegovina), or kept fluid identity influenced by different factors as: ethno- linguistics (Slavic- Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian ect.), religion (Islam), even sentimental connection to the pre national imperial past of Ottoman empire, or have tendency to create separate ethnicity on political criteria (the case of Muslim Bulgarians (*Pomaks*) in Bulgaria and Muslim Macedonians (*Torbesh*) in Macedonia). From the other side manifestation of political and national affiliations of those groups can be motivated and by the power of assimilation determined by religion or various historical sentiments, into Albanian or Turkish communities.

At the end 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Southeastern Europe did not appear as region denoted with nations-states, and was symbolized with the Orthodoxy and Islam. Therefore the Muslim Millet regardless of the different ethnical and language distinction of the groups Muslim Slavs remained as a part of an

undifferentiated discourse of The Otherness. The Mosque was presenting combat against the national awareness of the Muslim people, striving for the universality of the religion as an alone carrier of the collective organizing of the believers. Opposite of that, the Church is the barrier of the national awakening and rebirth, standing as an institutional foundation of the Balkan nations-states [5].

1.1. Makedonci muslimani in Republic of Macedonia

Collective group identity, at the category nowadays best known as *Makedonci muslimani* begins its establishing together with the process of Islamizing and separating from the main Christian community. On religious bases consequently, the relationship towards the “Other” was built including the one with people from the same language group.

Creating nations according the language, with an exception of the Albanians, has been obstructed from the religious aspect maintaining the old separation from the Ottoman Empire. Therefore it was impossible not only to integrate the groups that according the ethnical and language bases differs from one another from the dominant nations within the national country, but it was impossible as well for those groups holding identical language or ethnical bases: *Pomaks* from Bulgaria, *Slav-Muslims* from Bosnia and Herzegovina, “*Makedonci muslimani*” from Macedonia etc. The Christian nations on the Balkans have started to understand each other with the language of nationalism, while their attitude towards the Muslims remained in the domain of the undifferentiated discourse among the religious communities. Conversely on that, the inability of the Muslims to adapt to the national code, practically excluded them from the process of national integrating, so they kept the fluid awareness that for long time after was an image for a Millett-mentality of this area and therefore to the Ottoman heritage [6]. The identity is a fluid, historically ingrained deed. The limits set among the groups and the loyalty grown towards the group, all have been changed and adjusted many times [7].

The new bordering after 1912 has become the basic criterion for defining the collective identities. National identity was promoted as a primary factor in the group identification, rivaling in the same religious collective categorizing manner as known afore. Bart’s notion for an ethnical group refers to the societal aggregate that depicts a consistent form of action, beliefs and perform of its own collective membership of the group based on indicative culture criteria. He emphasizes that as for the establishing, development and the defining of the ethnical groups the bases are in the processes and their constituting and maintaining the bordering [7]. The phenomenon and the existence of the groups are mattered from the corner on the units that might be identified through maintaining of their bordering [8]. Even though that the thesis for a martial maintaining of the culture of one tribe or people as for the sake of their neighbors is being rejected, yet the scientific attitude according to which the geographical and societal isolation that provides a cultural diversity still appears as predominant. In other words, the existing of the ethnical categories are not based on the dynamism, contacts and information but on the process of societal excluding and including that maintains such categories despite of the individual experiences. The discrepancies are not depending of the absence of interaction and the cultural differences might exist in spite the ethnical contacts and depending of certain groups.

Within the period of few decades after the end of World War II the already gotten aspect regarding the national origin for *Makedonci muslimani* as part of the *Turkish* or *Albanian nation*, is still predominated [9]. Under the new communistic authorities that were based on the ideology and secularism, the power of the Islamic community started to weaken. All of these are depicted through the educational process, as well as in the behavior of the population at that time when between the 50-ties and the 60-ties of the 20th century migrating towards Turkey was on. The combination of the Macedonian Christian aspect to the one that gives content to the *Macedonian-hood* as well as the relation between the Christians and the Muslims is excluding the category “*Makedonci muslimani*”. As for the *Macedonians*, the inherent conflict between the Orthodoxy as a central element of their identity and Islam, is actually excluding the Macedonian Muslims a priori from the Macedonian community in a manner that they have imagined.

As for Fraenkel, it is conceptually unable for Macedonians to adjust the concept of the Macedonian to the one of a Muslim, not only regarding the definition categories that refer to themselves in the world but seemingly regarding the continuous national culture and political practice that was traced by Macedonian Authorities ever since the end of World War II, during the so-called Yugoslavian period where after 1991 the independency of Republic of Macedonia was ongoing and implemented [10].

The implications for community of *Makedonci muslimani* were significant not only within the inner-Muslim behavior but towards the Macedonians as well. The ability of the people to decide “*who are they*”, was caused by the politicians which claim the knowing of “*who they really are*”, as a political decision and not cultural or societal criterion [10]. It seems clear that the invention for mutual Macedonian-hood was not durable which refers to the fact that neither Macedonian Christians nor Macedonian Muslims obeyed the idea for a mutual cultural identity, in regard of the ethnographic relations [10]. Odzeski uses the pejorative term “*Torbesh*” for *Makedonci muslimani* as a frustration that seems equally directed as: firstly, towards the categorizers in the image of Macedonian Christians that do not accept this religiously different community as a concurrent part of Macedonian people or nation and secondly, towards the self-identifying character of the identity of *Makedonci muslimani* that “still do not know themselves good enough and they recognize themselves the best as “*Torbesh*” [11].

The national non-acceptance by the Macedonian Christian majority, almost always follows with construction of the historical view where changing of religion is taken as renegade and non-loyal to which Macedonian Muslims perceive as a projection of the sense of collective historical guilt that their ancestors have transferred to them on and on. All of the above-mentioned is causing confusion when it comes to collective or especially the national identity. The mainstream of Macedonian nation refuses *Makedonci muslimani* as part of the unique nation; Turks, even-though that *Makedonci muslimani* are coquetting as real Turks, do not consider them as their own people, just as the Albanians – considering them as foreigners, not belonging to their group [5]. *The Makedonci muslimani* feel as there are torn between the other ethnical Macedonians, towards which they grow a sense of national loyalty. Same as towards the Turks and Albanians who share same faith and whose political attitudes are at the same time unacceptable for them. Marginalizing of *Makedonci muslimani* by the Albanian and Turkish groups is a significant factor to increase their feeling for nationalism [12]. The insufficiently developed national feeling is primary spontaneously expressed through customs, folklore and mentality.

1.2. Two cases from Dolna Reka

The scientific paper with the title “Ethnical Groups and Their Boundaries” by Frederik Bart is about the study of the issues of the ethnical groups and their existence. As of the anthropological researches of this subject, the cultural view according to which the existence of human communities sharing same culture, which refers to the differences and similarities with other culture of such type, comes as the base of the ethnicity itself. Bart primary appoints to the human behavior in terms of wider existing group but yet puts the accent over the cultural level [8]. Tracking of the ethnical groups cannot be drawn to the level of only being cultural groups, but before all, they should be considered as types of organizations that are based on the awarding and self-ascribing of individuals i.e. of certain ethnical categories. The phenomenon and the existence of the ethnical groups are being mattered in terms of units that might identify themselves through maintaining their bordering. Bart, seemingly, cannot be considered into one theoretical frequency, i.e. he deals with an interaction as the same time (referring to Goffman), but on the other hand he places the individual action on the first place [8]. In this paper those relations are thoroughly reviewed in the context of the two most powerful factors of construction of identity to the group of Macedonian Muslims – language and religion.

The differences between the groups and their bordering have attracted a huge attention many centuries before, but never ever been studied in such systematic manner as it is done by Bart. Even though that today the thesis for martial maintaining of culture of one tribe or people because of their neighbor is being rejected, yet the scientific attitude according to which the geographical and societal isolation are providing the cultural diversity, is still predominated. In other words, the existence of ethnical categories is not based on dynamism, contacts and information, but on the process of including and excluding in the society, that will maintain those categories despite of the individual experiences. The explicit fluctuation in the identities at the Macedonian Muslims is a trait to everyone along Dolna Reka region. Analogically to that condition, we come across a situation of the Pomak identity in the vicinities of Rodop Mountings in R. Bulgaria. The fluctuations differ depending of the inhabited areas. While in the village of Skudrinje people traditionally, with an exception of 1981, declare as Turks, in Zirovnica there is a fluctuation regarding the Macedonian, Turkish and Muslim nomination. Therefore, the determining of the geography and the national declaration goes in direction to a conceptualizing of bordering between neighboring vicinities. Macedonian Muslims from the regions of village Rostuse and village Velebrdo which live together with the orthodox Macedonians, use the Turkish identification based on the religion in order to withdraw an ethnical bordering with their Macedonian neighbors. But those who live in the eastern part of Dolna Reka, in village Zerovnica all together with the Albanians, declare themselves as Macedonians, not because of the nature of their Macedonian national awareness but moreover to separate themselves from the Albanian population that as a competitive group might jeopardize the geographical space and their existing.

The second example emphasizes the selective interpretation of the past. On the day of 30th September, 1943, on the Christian holiday called Krstovden and the very first date of the Muslim holiday Bayram, there was an incident in v. of Rostuse. The incident was started accidentally, while few peasants in order to celebrate Bayram in front of the Mosque shot few times in the air. After the attempt of the Albanian police to confiscate the weapons there was confrontation and further in a gun firing. Further on the municipal building in Rostuse was fired. On the 2nd of October a huge number of Ballistic coming from village Galicnik and Trebiste came over

and the riots stopped.

It is said that in those moments, when the Ballistic came they wanted to repress the Christians in the village but the Muslims took a side in their defense and protected them. October is the time when there were disputes with the partisans which took over Rostuse but within the contra-riot on the 27th of October, the allied Ballistic from village Trebiste, Gostivar and village Trnica together with the Albanian police from Rostuse and Zirovnica rioted in the meadows between Bituse and Trebiste. Many men from village Bituse were gathered in front of the Mosque in Rostuse but after the intervention of the local Muslims, their shooting was stopped. On 13th of October the Ballistic that intruded mined and exploded the church that was situated in the center of Rostuse by the gang of Dzemo that previously burned every church book in Vrbjanci [11].

This very recent event of ruining the church in Rostuse would cause many contraversion and would create conditions of tension between the Christian and Muslim community in the village, with a potential to infringe the traditional harmonized confessional relations. As for Todorovski, the infringing of the church in Rostuse, that happened on 13th of November 1943 was performed by the local inhabitants "Islamized Macedonians" [9]. This aspect was supported by a large number of Christian contemporaries of this event, which emphasize that many of them were forced by their fellow-peasants to ruin the church. As for Nijazi Limanovski the church in Rostuse was ruined by the Ballistic from the above-mentioned village Vrbjani. As for Todorovski this approach is an image of the Muslims that refuse to talk about the event, therefore insisting to minimize it in order not to cause any other tensions [9].

However, different presenting of the history is not resulting from 1943 but it is a represent of the core difference that were created with the process of islamization of the Mijak group, meaning the difference regarding the confessional belonging. The church "St. Bogorodica" that was situated in the center of the Rostuse was turned into mosque that served until 1912 when once more was turned into church. It was rebuilt in 1936 and in 1943 was ruined. Today the place is used as a village square and a playground for children in the primary school. There is a separation in the perception of the historical significance of the place between the Muslims and the Christians. One of them says "in front of the mosque" and the other say "in front of the church" or "in the center of the village" [13]. As during the construction of the historical image of this place, both confessions make up a selective impression. The Christians say that on this place there was a Christian religious facility even before the ottoman arrival, taking the liberty to consider this a holy spot, at the same time the Muslims insist that before the building of the church between the two World Wars, there was a mosque. On the other hand, while the Christians keep themselves silent about the ruining of the mosque, in 1912, the Muslims attempt to create a condition of amnesia regarding the ruining of the church in 1943.

3. Conclusion

The collective group identity to the category today known as *Makedonci muslimani*, start its creation with the process of conversion to Islam and segregation from Christian community. So through the religious base are built relations with the other, including the one with the same linguistic origin.

National creation on the base of the language, except the Albanian example, found obstacles in religious aspect, keeping the old division of Ottoman Millet system. The Christians of the Balkan understanding the language of nationalisms, but there's attitude to the Muslims is close in the domen of non-defined discourse between religious communities. From the other side because the Balkan Muslims couldn't adapt to the national code, exclude from the process of national integration and homogenization, they kept there fluid consciousness, represented thru the millet mentality, and the Ottoman heritage.

Through the twentieth century, on the today's territory of Republic of Macedonia, through this group were promoted Serbian, Albanian and Macedonian nationality. The Agency used the secularization of the society as base for promotion of ethno linguistic character of the national identities. The education and mass administration were the basic tools for indoctrination.

In after Second World War period, that which gives content on *Makedonctvoto* (Macedonianhood), like the relations between the Christians and the Muslims, excludes the category of *Makedonci muslimani*. For the Macedonians (Macedonians equal Christians), the inherent conflict between the Orthodoxy, as a central element of their identity and the Islam, a priori excludes all the Muslims.

The last tendencies promote two powerful criteria as creators and carriers of the collective identification. The first is the Political mobilization, as a factor of national defining, used in direction of creation of separate "Torbesh" ethnicity, and the second are the factors created by Global economic market, and population mobility.

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