



Education and Culture DG

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Reconciliation Through art: Perceptions of Hijab

2nd TRANSNATIONAL WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

The Mohammedan Bulgarians (Pomaks)

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The Mohammedan Bulgarians (the so-called *Pomaks*) have often been the subject of research in contemporary Bulgarian and Balkan historiography. The major problem in such studies is the conversion to Islam: when, how and for what reason did it happen, was violence applied in adopting Islam or economic considerations were quite enough. The analysis of all existing publications indicates that the Mohammedan Bulgarians adopted Islam on a mass scale mainly in the period 17th-18th c. The reasons for that vary. Naturally there was change of faith imposed with sword, but this was not the only and the major reason for adopting Islam. It seems that the main factor was economic pressure and the temptation of privileges and tax reductions received immediately after renouncing the Christian faith. Still another group of reasons for adopting Islam by Mohammedan Bulgarians is suggested – the greed of Greek Orthodox clergy, the conflict of the Bogomils with the Orthodox Church, etc.

A second group of studies of Mohammedan Bulgarians is centered on their ancient Bulgarian language, their rituals and traditional culture, in which scholars discover many traces of the pre-Islamic period and the so-called crypto-Christianity. We can't disregard also a third group of studies, which uncovers the common hereditary roots, the kinship relations or the common property of Mohammedan Bulgarians and Christian Bulgarians.

All authors and scholars of the period till 1878 – before the appearance of modern Bulgarian education, Bulgarian institutions and administration, which could apply some administrative measures of subjective influence in creating written evidence about Mohammedan Bulgarians, almost without exception, call the language of this Muslim population *Bulgarian* and rarely *Slavic*. They never forget to mention that Mohammedan Bulgarians were first Christians, traces of which can be detected in their rituals, folk holidays, lineal or family names, in toponymy and hydronymy of their settlements.

The speech of Mohammedan Bulgarians, as modern dialectological analyses show, has preserved a number of grammatical and phonetic features of Old Bulgarian. Mohammedan Bulgarians in various geographic regions speak the local Bulgarian dialect, also spoken by the local Christian Bulgarians. Thus, in terms of dialect, the Mohammedan Bulgarians from different parts of Bulgarian ethnic territory belong to different dialectal groups. The speech of the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians, for example, can be classified with the Rupcha

group of dialects, that of the Lovech Mohammedan Bulgarians – with the Lovech and Teteven dialects, that of the Torbeshi, Marvaki and Miatzi – with the West Bulgarian or Macedonian dialects. The speech of Mohammedan Bulgarians from different parts of Bulgaria cannot be brought down to one single dialect or variant, because they speak different Bulgarian dialects depending on the region in which they live or on their place of origin. This refutes all attempts of recent times to find a common “pomak speech” or create some “Pomak language”.

For the same reason Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be united culturally into a single ethno-cultural or ethnographic group, because linguistically as well as culturally they belong to different regional groups, which correspond to the characteristics of the local Christian population. For example, the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians are ethnologically similar to the Rhodope Ruptzi; the Lovech Pomaks – to the Zagortzi; the Torbeshi, Miatzi and Marvatzi – to Macedonian Bulgarians. This invalidates all attempts to put into use the notion of “pomak ethnos”. We can’t even speak of a “Pomak ethnographic group”, because Mohammedan Bulgarians from different parts of Bulgarian ethnic territory belong to various ethnographic groups.

Despite the abundance of literature, the problem of the exact geographic boundaries of Mohammedan Bulgarians still remains unsettled as a result of many factors of political nature, which constantly shape and leave their hard to delete marks in reference books about the history of each the Balkan nations.

Of great importance to at least approach the historical truth is to analyze the accumulated data about the geographic boundaries of the Mohammedan Bulgarians. They almost coincide in their scope with the ethnic territory of the Bulgarians of the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c. Till the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-78 their settlements are concentrated in several geographic zones:

- To the north of the Balkan Range (the regions of Lovech, Pleven, Teteven, Byala Slatina, Vratza, Tarnovo, Oryahovo and part of the Ruse district)
- In the Rhodope Mountain and Aegean Trace (the regions of Dospat, Devin, Chepino, Smolyan, Peshtera, Pazardzhik, Zlatograd, Kardzhali, MADAN, Rudozem, Asenovgrad, Plovdiv, Gumurdzhina and Xanti)
- In Macedonia (the regions of Nevrokop, Drama, Tessalonika, Moglen, Veles, Resen, Ohrid, Avren Hisar, Kichevo, Bitola, Prilep, Debar, Kostur, Tikvesh, Tetovo, Kochan, Strumitza, Voden and Skopje)
- In Albania (the regions of Reka and Golo Bardo)

The Russian-Turkish War 1877-78, the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 and the political events of the following decades set the beginning of several migration waves of Mohammedan Bulgarians, who together with other Muslim from Bulgaria (primarily ethnic

Turks) headed south to settle permanently in Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace. As a result of these migrations the number of Mohammedan Bulgarians is reduced, mainly to the north of the Balkan Range.

The Mohammedan Bulgarians, who moved to Eastern Thrace and Asia Minor settled in separate villages and quarters and founded new ones, where they formed a compact population. For that reason they have preserved for a long period their mother tongue and old traditions.

Following carefully all written sources about Mohammedan Bulgarians, we arrive at the conclusion that they don't have one single name, byname or self-appellation. In different geographic regions, where their settlements are, they are called by different names. In the Rhodope Mountain they are known as *Ahryani*, in Macedonia – as *Torbeshi*, *Matvatzi* and *Miatzi* (the last two are also names of Christian Bulgarians). To the north of the Balkan Range their ancient name and self-appellation is *Pomaks*. Gradually their local name is transferred through literary sources also to Mohammedan Bulgarians to the south of the Balkans. It entered foreign publications, but never entered the speech of Mohammedan Bulgarians from Thrace, Macedonia and Albania, who didn't accept it as a self-appellation.

In Bulgarian historical literature and documents after the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman oppression in 1878 the literary term is “Bulgarian-Mohammedans”, later changed to “Mohammedan Bulgarians”. This term is used only in written texts. In spoken language, on everyday level sometimes also appear the local names or self-appellations mentioned above. But when this population must state their national belonging, they define themselves as Bulgarians and in term of religious affiliation – as Muslims (arch. Mohammedans)

The literary term “Mohammedan Bulgarians” is on the same level with the names of other non-Orthodox Bulgarians like Catholic Bulgarians and Protestant Bulgarians. It also preserves their religious feelings, without separating them on ethnic principles from the rest of the Bulgarians.

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