

ETHNIC AFFILIATION, COMMON MEMORY AND TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF MACEDONIAN MUSLIMS IN ALBANIA: ADAPTATING AND PRESERVING THE IDENTITY (FIELDWORKS OF 2008-2010)

Alexander Novik

*Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera)
of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, Russia*

Abstract: The paper is devoted to the question of ethnic affiliation of Macedonian Muslims in conditions of combined ethnical neighborhood. There are around ten settlements with Macedonian population in the Eastern part of the Republic of Albania (Mac. Golo Brdo, Alb. Golloborda). Five scientific researchers from St. Petersburg: Andrej Sobolev, Alexander Novik, Denis Ermolin, Maria Morozova and Alexandra Dugushina (Institute of Linguistic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography and St. Petersburg State University) had organized fieldwork in the villages Trebisht, Klenje, Ostren etc. in 2008-2010. The author puts into academic context a new description of almost unexplored Macedonian community. The data have been obtained during the fieldworks in Eastern Albania. In conditions of long-term neighborhood with other languages and religious denominations, the adapting mechanisms have worked out specific approaches to preserving ethnical identity and

traditional culture, perceiving their value and necessity of translating to descendants. Materials of fieldwork include data about identity, language, culture of Macedonian community in different periods of the state of Albania (Osmanli time, Royal Albania, Enver Hoxha monism period, post-communist transition, modern republic). These expedition materials are archived in the Kunstkamera (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences). The founs of the Museum have traditional clothes of Macedonian Muslims from Golo Brdo which are collected during the fieldworks 2008-2010.

Keywords: Macedonian Muslims, Albania, common memory, narratives, identity combined ethnical *neighborhood*, *traditional culture*

The border territory between Albania and Macedonia is an important area for ethnographic, linguistic, ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic studies. This region is inhabited by Albanians (Muslims, Catholic and

Orthodox Christians), Macedonians (Orthodox and Muslim), Muslim Roma, and Orthodox Aromanians. This multiethnic and multiconfessional situation determines the complexity of social and cultural processes in North-Eastern Albania and Western Macedonia.

In 2008-2010 our research group (Andrey Sobolev, Alexander Novik, Denis Ermolin, Maria Morozova and Alexandra Dugushina) conducted fieldwork expeditions in the region of Golo Bordo (Alb. Gollobord/ë - a) in North-Eastern Albania (with the focus on the village of Trebisht). The overall number of Muslim Macedonians in this region reaches several thousands, and more exact statistics are still in lack. The official results of the latest census of population and households in Albania (held in October-November 2011, Alb. *Censusi i popullsisë dhe i banesave 2011*) that were published in 2012 don't elucidate this issue [Censusi 2011, INSTAT]. According to the Albanian Institute of Statistics, the population of the country is 2 821 977 people with the Macedonian minority of 0,2 % [Censusi 2011; Censusi 2011, INSTAT]. Macedonian as a mother tongue (Alb. *gjuhë amtare*) declared 0,16 % of population (thus, not all the people who declared the Macedonian identity can speak the language). However these figures comprise all Macedonians of the country – including the officially recognized Macedonian community in the Prespa Lakes region.

Slavic population of Golo Bordo is extremely interesting when it comes to the issues of identity preservation and its transformation in the changing environment of multiethnic, multilingual and multiconfessional region. Their collective memory is based on the established set of markers that seem to be important while analyzing the current social and cultural situation in this Slavic-Albanian border area.

The question of self-identification in this region is rather complicated. We managed to record the following options: *Makedonci*, *Muslimane*, *Turci*, *Naši* [АМАЭ: Новик 2008б: 7]. On the one hand, Muslim Slavs clearly realize their connection with the neighbouring Macedonian ethnic massive – the state border runs nearby, and the mountains and settlements viewed from Trebisht are situated in Macedonia. Ethnically speaking, the area of Golo Bordo is the continuum of Western Macedonian territories. On the other hand, the drastic majority of Slavic population in Western Macedonia is Orthodox (with the exception of a wide border-line area with the Muslim inhabitants that are called by some researchers as *torbeši*). This is the reason for some problems and ambiguity in ethnic identification. The ethnonym *Muslimane* is also disputable among the locals, as the quite large amount of people living nearby both in Albania and Macedonia are Muslim Albanians. Moreover, we shouldn't forget about the Muslim population of Bosnia where the term *Muslimane* still functions as the widely-accepted ethnonym.

The analysis of ethnonyms led us to the following observation. We didn't mention to record a very possible and even expected endo-ethnonym "*sloveni*" [АМАЭ: Новик 2008б: 7]. As far as we realize, the term "*sloveni*" is more likely applied to define the Orthodox Slavic population – Macedonians, Serbs, Bulgarians, and Montenegrins. Here we can't but remember the fact that Muslim population of the closely-situated regions in Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania use the ethnonym "Slavs" to refer mostly to the Serbian population (who are as a rule Orthodox).

The ethnonym *B'lgari* that is being imposed from outside is also used rarely¹. Bulgarian researchers have been conducting a lot of fieldwork research ius numerous stories about Bulgarian scholars who come

and call the locals “Bulgarians”, but they don’t use this term among themselves – it happens only sporadically.

The already mentioned ethnonyms *Naši* and *Turci* are also clear. The term *Naši* can be definitely regarded as a result of natural desire to separate themselves from the others – first of all, Albanians who speak a completely different language, notwithstanding the common religion – Islam. The endo-ethnonym *Turci* can be traced back to the Ottoman past, as in the Ottoman Empire the ethnic criterion was not taken into account. All the social issues were discussed and regulated via the system of millets that was based on the idea of confessional differentiation of the population of the Empire: all Muslims were regarded as being Turks, Orthodox were thought to be Greeks. Practicing or converting to Islam was the way for an ethnic group to enter the Turk Millet – the dominant ethnical and religion community of the Empire [Иванова 1982].

The self-nomination *Naši* is used quite often among the Slavic population of Golo Bordo. The terms *Naši* and *Naši ljudi* are especially preferred in the situations when it is necessary to draw the boundary between the locals and their neighbours living near-by or in the same area or even in the same ethno-historical region (*krahinë-a*).

The ethnonym *Turci* is also well-known and clear. If we take into account the system of micro-toponyms in the whole region or even in the villages, the presence of numerous Orthodox churches and chapels, as well as the remembrance of the elderly people, we may conclude that the conversion to Islam happened quite recently – at the end of the 18th – beginning of the 19th centuries. As a rule, the conversion to Islam in the Balkans could be explained by economic factors. Our interlocutors note that their ancestors switched to Islam because

of the fiscal policy of the Ottoman government. However the researcher doing his or her fieldwork should always be critical to this information – we should distinguish between the information that is the integral part of the collective memory and the knowledge of the recent past got from education, mass media and literature. However, since the time of the conversion, the Slavs in Golo Bordo ended up with associating themselves with the dominant ethnic group – so this self-identification with Turks (by the confessional criterion) remains in their identity and can be clearly witnessed during the fieldwork.

Ethnic identity of Muslim Macedonians is closely connected to the issue of their language. Slavic population in Golo Bordo speaks a dialect of Macedonian. They call their own language in different ways: *naš jozik* (our language), *Macedonian*, *Turkish*. Such difficulties in defining the mother tongue are related to the official status of the language of the Macedonian population of Golo Bordo in Albania (but, of course, it is not the only reason). Macedonian in Golo Bordo isn’t taught at school and isn’t used in press; however people speak the local dialect at home and in public places among themselves, and at the same time they can hear the standard Macedonian language in TV (as almost in every house the satellite receiver is installed and the channels from Macedonia are quite popular).

The majority of Muslim Macedonians in Golo Bordo are bilinguals. The life in the Republic of Albania with its economical and social relations resulted in spreading and adapting of the Albanian language. However in Slavic villages in Golo Bordo we witnessed the following situation: a lot of elderly ladies who have spent their life predominantly in their native region may be rather poor in Albanian.

The identity of Slavic population in Golo Bordo can be viewed through the set of symbols and markers. So, we should mention some elements of their traditional culture, such as: traditional garments (that are distinguished not only from the types of costume in neighbouring regions, but also vary within the *krahina* of Golo Bordo), characteristics and peculiarities of calendar and family rites, handicraft as one of the most significant components of their culture, domestic skills and practices, etc. For instance, almost every male person in Golo Bordo has the qualification of a bricklayer. This craft has been very indicative for locals, as well as for other males from Dibra region since the Middle Ages. And even nowadays the professional occupation in this field or just practical building skills remain

among the men in Golo Bordo and are regarded as a hereditary craft of this ethnic group.

The community of Muslim Macedonians in Golo Bordo share a number of self-references, ethnonyms, and symbols of identity, as well as markers of collective memory, which reflect the historical development of this ethnic group and can be analyzed in the context of comparative Slavic-Albanian border studies. The complicated system of specific symbols and markers of local, ethnic and confessional identities and self-references makes it possible to conduct our research on the example of different facts and factors that have established this community in the situation of cultural and language contacts and interactions that have been taking place in this region for a long period of time.