

Elena Uzeneva

*Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences
Moscow, Russia*

The Calendar Rites of the Muslim Bulgarians— at the Crossroads of the Cultures

Abstract. The paper presents some preliminary results of the field research conducted by the author during the ethnolinguistic expeditions in the Middle Rhodopes in southern Bulgaria in 2012—2014. The field research was aimed at collecting materials on the traditional calendar of the Bulgarians Muslims (Pomaks) who live in Bulgaria where Orthodox Christianity is its main religion. The expedition's task was also to detect traces of mutual influences and interference in the texts of traditional culture, its archaic and borrowed reservoirs; to determinate assessment mechanisms of "their" and "foreign" language and culture, to analyze the completeness of different cultural codes in the culture of the Muslim Bulgarians. As a result of the data analysis, the author came to the conclusion that in the national calendar of the Pomaks there are a number of phenomena similar to those cultural phenomena of the neighboring Christian population, due to their common ethnic origin. In the traditional Muslim culture, however, a more compact calendar—in comparison to the extensive system of Christian Orthodox calendar rites—has a compensatory mechanism, which operates on the principle of substitution and intensification of magical acts in various rituals and beliefs.

Keywords: calendric rituals, magic, Muslim Bulgarians, Orthodox Christianity, paganism, traditional culture.

The article presents preliminary results of a field research conducted by the author during the ethnolinguistic expeditions in the Middle Rhodope in Southern Bulgaria in 2012—2014 and contains materials on the traditional calendar of the Muslim Bulgarians, who live in Bulgaria where Orthodox Christianity is the main religion. The objective of the expeditions was to investigate the historical, cultural and linguistic heritage of the Muslim Bulgarians living in a different confessional environment for over the centuries in order to identify general and particular features in their language and culture in comparison with their neighbors (Slavs, Christians, Turks, Muslims) and others.

Muslim Bulgarians (*bŭlgari myusyulmani, pomatsi, akhryane*) represent cultural and religious groups distinguished by their marginal cultural status in Bulgarian society.¹ According to their ethnic origin, they are Bulgarians, Slavs speaking Bulgarian, but confessing a difference from the Christian's religion.

Bulgarian-Mohammedans have been for many centuries living compactly in Bulgarian villages in Western and Eastern Rhodope neighboring Bulgarian Christians and ethnic Turks. For this group of the population, more similar in terms of language would undoubtedly be the Bulgarians, but from the religious point of view, Turks may seem more "affined" because they are also Muslims. Language, however, is a stronger marker for ethno-definition compared to religion. How the Muslim Bulgarian community is perceived by neighboring communities is also of great importance: on the one hand, they are "affined" and on the other hand, they are "alien". Christians do not completely accept them as "their own" as they confess Islam, and Turks don't fully accept them as "their own" because Pomaks are Sunnis, not Shiites, as the Turks are, and speak a different language. The Islamic doctrine common in Bulgaria belongs to the Sunni Hanafi School. On the one hand, it continues the tradition of the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, it is a reflection of the historical development of the Third Bulgarian State (Troeva 2012: 5). I give below some of the major milestones of the history of Pomaks in Bulgaria:

- 14th—16th centuries—beginning of the forced Islamization of Christian Bulgarians in Rhodope region,
- 17th century—completion of the Islamization process of Rhodope,
- 1912—the Balkan Wars—an attempt of the Bulgarian state to converse Pomaks to Orthodoxy,
- the 1930s—creation of intelligentsia among the Pomaks and the cultural-educational organization "Friendship Homeland",
- 1942—1944—change of the Arab-Turkish names to Bulgarian ones,
- the 1950s—implementation of the passport system in the country, Pomaks massively register themselves as Turks. "Cultural Revolution" among the Pomaks. The process of "liberation" from Islamic elements in the culture, ban on wearing traditional clothing.

– the 1970s—the second stage of name changes to Bulgarian.

During the twentieth century, the State repeatedly attempted to force integration of the Bulgarian nation with the Muslim Bulgarians. During the Balkan wars of 1912—1913, they were Christianized (baptized) by force. During the Socialist period, when a general attitude to religion was negative, and its practice was possible only in the field of family relations, the Communist authorities in the 1970s and 1980s forced Pomaks and Turks to change their Turkish-Arabic names to Bulgarian. The ban was imposed on the Muslim clothes (tarboosh and the turban for men, trousers and covering veil “feredzhe” burqa for women), on visits to worship houses and mosques, on the celebration of religious holidays and so forth. Mass migrations of the rural population to the cities contributed to a violation of the traditional order of religious knowledge transmission through the family and rural community.

However, after the democratic changes in Bulgaria in 1989, the Muslims got the freedom to regain their old names and practice Islam. In different regions inhabited by Pomaks in Bulgaria, several trends in search of the identity and attitude towards religion are currently observed² from religious renaissance (Western Rhodope, Madan, Rudozem, Gotse Delchev) to complete atheism and conversion to Christianity—Orthodoxy and Evangelism. The last one is mostly common among the youth and those Muslims living in the cities in the Northern and Eastern Rhodope who seek to free themselves from the dualism initially implied in their Bulgarian identity and language, and the Muslim religion itself (Troeva 2012: 7—8).

I conducted a field research in 2012—2014 in the Northern part of the Middle Rhodope (Smolyan region), where members of the local population consider themselves to be Bulgarian, confessing Islam. They are, in most cases, have kept their Bulgarian names, support the Muslim customs and celebrate holidays according to the “tradition” inherited from their parents. The religious norms are not strictly enforced. Young people are wearing European clothes. The mosques and houses of worship are visited mostly by the older men. In some villages the Muslim rituals have the features of the local tradition, which is currently denied by the young Islamic priests

studied abroad: the veneration of the saints and places of burial (*tyurbe*), committing the funeral rite and obit rite *mevlid* and *devir* (distribution of money for dead during the burial). The search for the identity got a new force, and new versions of the ancestry have been implemented. Here are some of them:

1. The legend about the origin of Pomaks in the times of Thrace; voluntary acceptance of Islam before the 14th century, hence before the Ottoman regime.

2. Pomaks are descendants of Muslims (Arabs, Turks, prophets) who settled in the Bulgarian lands centuries ago.

3. Family line of Islamized Bulgarians dates back to the five priests of King Boris, who refused to accept Orthodoxy during his attempt to baptize Bulgaria in the 7th century.

4. Pomaks are descendants of proto-Bulgarians and ethnic Turks who came to the Bulgarian lands in the 6th—7th centuries and genetically related to the Volga Bulgarians.

At present, three ways of cultural development are open to Muslim Bulgarians: re-Islamization, secularism, Christianization. It can be achieved by:

- Return to their roots (Islam), restoration of sacred places; religion as a marker of identity;

- Commitment to atheism; execution of certain Christian and Muslim rites; modernization of lifestyle and traditional culture; appeal to the Christian holy places (Krūstova mountain); pseudo-Christianization;

- Adoption of Christianity (conversion): Orthodoxy and Evangelism.

As mentioned above, in the Rhodope Mountains representatives of various beliefs have been living together for more than 400 years. Cohabitation between these two religions has always been peaceful and the informants are proud of their tolerance. Most of the Muslim population of the Middle Rhodope remember their Christian roots. The Muslim rites preserved some of the Christian relics:³ as well as Christians, they light a candle near the deceased or leave a lighted

lamp in the house for three days; on the 52th day of commemoration (*mevlid*) a long grace (*aminka*) is said, which title appeals to the completion of Christian prayer (*amin=amen*). Similar mascot acts are executed on St. George's Day in order to protect the house from the "magic", i.e. witchcraft. On St. George's Day, Muslims (who specifically went to the Orthodox churches) also tried to take from the church a little incense and eat a piece to protect themselves from being jinxed. In folk medicine, some protective actions are taken like usage of criss-cross pattern, which is reminiscent of the cross as a symbol of Christianity. Some bans are motivated by religious events. Thus, on Friday, it was forbidden to wash clothes not only because of the Friday Muslim prayers, but because Christ was crucified on Friday. They believe that if a woman washes clothes of her husband he will get sick.

The presence of the "new" customs related to Christianity among Muslims—visiting churches, lighting of candles, "secret" baptism of children, wearing the cross, treatment sessions in Christian holy places such as Krastova mountain, and also a toponymy data—is not influenced by proximit Christian villages. It is rather a return to the past, genetic memory going back to the deep roots as described by Bulgarian scientists—St. Shishkov (Shishkov 1936) and Khr. Vakarelski (Vakarelski 1965) in the early 20th century. Other possible explanation can be seen in the belief of the healing power of a particular sacred space or a saint that came as a reason for Muslims to visit objects of worship of other faiths for therapeutic purposes, as written in details in the monograph of O.V. Belova (Belova 2005).

However, in everyday life, the Muslim Bulgarians inevitably hold the views and traditions relating to their denomination and their system of values based on a number of fundamental spiritual principles of Islam. The most important holidays of the year are *Qurban Bayram* and *Sheker Bayram*. The Big one is celebrating "good health" and is known for the sacrifice made (*qurban*), and the Small Bayram, or so-called Sugar Bayram, is dedicated to the commemoration when sweets and sugar (*sheker*) are handed out.

Sometimes elements of Muslim prayer are entangled into an occasional pagan ritual. If it was frequently hailing during the summer, they would look for an orphan in the village and make him eat or bite (*da gi kisne*) three hail grains, ask him to throw salt three times

towards the sky and say: "*Ot solta po-edro da ne pada, bismileh i rahmane rahim*" [May anything bigger than a salt grain not fall. In the name of Allah, gracious and merciful]. When it was hailing, they also used the flowers left by children who visited the house on St. George's Day. These flowers were kept until the following year, and in the case of hail those dried flowers and wild geranium, as well as broken dogwood twig were put on a shovel and lit to stop the hail.

The traditional culture of the Muslim Bulgarians at Smolyan villages contains a number of pagan components included in the celebration of the Christian holidays: these are rites of St. George's Day (*Gergivden*), St. John the Baptist's Day (*Eniovden*), a custom of setting ritual kinship (*kumleniye*) between girls (*posestrimstvo*) and others. Pomaks' custom of guessing about marriage was conducted on Christmas Eve (*Bŭdni vecher*)—the same time as Christians. The name of the week from Christmas to Epiphany associated with the rampant evil spirits in this period has also kept its original name, *Buganska Sedmitsa* (*buganets*, ex. *poganets* 'evil spirit, house spirit').⁴

On New Year's Eve, Muslim Bulgarians, as well as Christians, bake a scone (*pita*), in which they put in a coin and a dogwood twig. Recently, in addition to dogwood and coins, they started to put pieces of paper with descriptions of other types of "happiness" (*kŭsmetcheta*): work, love, travel, education, marriage, and so on.

Back in times traditional to all Bulgarians, Christmas caroling was commonly done: *survakane*. For children they made *survachki*—twigs of dogwood whose lateral branches are waived to the Cyrillic letter "Ф". Twigs were decorated with wild rose hips, popcorn and red threads, dried apple slices and cotton fiber—all this was strung on a thread and hung on the branch. Children decorated the branches with their mothers and grandmothers. Early in the morning on January 1st children visited all houses of relatives and close neighbors and uttered good wishes (*da survakat*). In return, they used to receive coins and various delicacies. During the ritual, the master of the house would turn his back to visiting children, and they tapped him with sprigs saying: "*Surva, surva godina, vesela godina, zdrava gŭrbina, zhiv, zdrav—do godina, do godina, do amina*" [New Year, cheerful year, healthy back, live healthy until next year, until the next

year, until the end of the century]. The author notes that the text is almost identical to the version known among Christians.

Ivanovden (24.VI), associated with the summer solstice and the collection of healing herbs in the villages, is marked with girlish divination rituals, which were executed on the same day with Bulgarian Christians. The night before that day girls made bouquets of flowers (*kitki*), decorated them with recognizable details (*martenitsa*, colored threads, rings, blue beads)—each bunch necessarily contained nettles as an amulet against witchcraft and the evil eye (*uroki*)—and left it overnight in a copper pot in the open air under a bush of wild roses. Early in the morning the girls gathered in the village center and splashed water on each other (as on St. George's Day), sang songs, mainly about love and tried to tell fortunes (*narichat*). One of the girls took a bouquet out of the pot and guessed the future of its owner (*naricha* / *narezhdha*):

Kutro veliko chestito, na visok sarai da sedi, zhŭlti altŭne da nizhe [The lucky one, will sit high and will count yellow coins, i.e. the bouquet owner will be very rich].

Kutro veliko chestito, zhŭlti altŭne da nizhe [The lucky one will be sitting high and count yellow coins, i.e. the bouquet owner will become recognizable and rich].

Kutro veliko chestito, s kantar parite da tegli [The lucky one will be measuring money on the weights, i.e. marry a merchant].

Kutro veliko chestito, hergele kone da kara [The lucky one will ride a thin horse, i.e. marry a poor man].

Kutro veliko chestito, do Kasŭm da sa ozheni [The lucky one will get married on Kasŭm holiday].⁵

Wishes were not clearly defined and could be created in the process of divination. Each girl present at the divination took home her bouquet and kept it on the wall until the next year. The holiday ended by joint gatherings (*poprelka*) where the girls appeared smartly dressed in new clothes and fezzes, where they sewed, knitted and sang songs and at the end of the day they used to comb hair, dipping the comb in the water from the flower bouquets ("to make hair long and beautiful"), and braided each other sixty fine braids, weaving in the ends colorful beads as decorations (*krachelni sincheta*), hence hanging on

the ends of the braids. This hair braiding made by Muslim tradition has the Slavic name *preniz*. This ritual hairdo was done not only for that exact celebration. Usually the mother after bathing girls braided their hair that way to make them pretty and for hygienic reasons (the hair does not get dirty so quickly).

The individual elements of the archaic rituals are associated with certain days of the calendar, particularly St. George's Day (6.V), for which the Muslim Bulgarians kept the Slavic name *Gergivden*, *Praznik na Ovchara*, *Praznik na seloto* and is considered one of the most venerated holidays of the year after Bayram. In other Muslim villages of the region, the holiday is known as Khaderlez, Aderlez, Adrelez, Drelez.⁶ St. George's Day here preserves the semantics of the beginning not only of a spring cycle, but a new year: it is linked to common rituals of the first washing with water/dew specially prepared on the eve, collecting herbs, preventive measures against magic, snakes, and so on. The people believed that what you did on this day, you would do the whole year: if you counted money, you would count them (had in abundance) all year.

The night before St. George's Day, the housemistress collected blooming tree branches and wild geranium (*zdravetz*) and left it over night in a container with water. The next morning she washed her face with the dew for "health and beauty", collected nettles and stuck it into the lintel of the front door to prevent the household from "the evil forces and witchcraft", swept the house, put the garbage from the house and the barn on a shovel, lit incense and fumigated the house and the housemates to save them from "evil forces, evil eye and snake bites". In order not to encounter snakes in the summer on St. George's Day, it is accustomed to avoid touching scissors and needles. On this day, the Muslims were required to bring the grass (forty two twigs) to the barn with animals, search for special herbs *parovo bile* to pull in money (*pari*) in order to have them in abundance this year, and herbs for love (*galiovno bile*) to get married. Dried herbs were stored until the next year.

Children had to sprawl out and tumble in the morning dew on St. George's Day, wash their eyes, face, and hair with the dew and then splash water with specially prepared bouquets of flowers and wild geranium, which had been prepared the day before, on the houses of

their relatives and neighbors, for which they get rewards in form of money and treats. Before going home, children would leave parts of the flowers and geraniums in the houses. These detours of the houses made by children resemble Christmas house visiting (*survakane*) of Christian Bulgarians when kids tap all housemates with the dogwood twigs worshipping “health” and also get rewarded for that.

St. George’s Day was the only day of the year when milk was fermented with the help of the dew and not the ferment. Before dawn, they would go to the holy springs in Christian villages (*ayazmo*), bring out water, give it to housemates to drink and use it for cooking food, making sure it is “solid” (potatoes, beans, lentils) in order to make everything in life “be complete and go smoothly”.

Based on the analysis of the field data collected on the subject of the traditional culture of the Muslim Bulgarians, I come to the conclusion that the folk calendar of the Pomaks has a number of features similar to the cultural features of the neighboring Christian folk due to their common descent. These elements can be attributed to the archaic components of folk culture, which could have been modified under the influence of local religious and regional traditions. Often the culture of the Muslim Bulgarians contains “forgotten” Christian knowledge and preserves old dialectic lexical tokens affiliated with the rites.

Elements of the Islamic culture are related mainly to the religious practice and beliefs (religious holidays such as Bairam: *Kurban Bayram*, or *Golem Bayram*, *Malūk Bayram*, or *Sheker Bayram*, etc.) and are incorporated into the common holiday tradition of the Bulgarian Christians. However, in the traditional culture of the Muslims despite a less detailed calendar, unlike the extensive system of the Orthodox calendar rites, works the principle of substitution—various rituals and beliefs are enriched with magical actions which give those rituals additional content (often forgotten by Christians).

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Notes

1. More detailed bibliography on Muslim Bulgarians study can be found in the book written by I. Kyurkicheva (Kyurkicheva 2004: 6—9).
2. More detailed information on this subject can be found in the book by E. Troeva (Troeva 2011).
3. For more detailed information about those phenomena of Pomaks from Zlatograd region, please see (Uzeneva 2013), Teteven region—(Uzeneva 2014).
4. The terminology of demonic characters of Rhodope is well analyzed and partially charted in the monograph of Evgeniya Troeva-Grigorova, see chart No. 6 (Troeva-Grigorova 2003: 244).
5. *Kasūm* is celebrated here on November 8 which coincides with the Christmas holiday of St. Dmitry's Day by Julian Calendar. Bulgarians use Gregorian Calendar nowadays, and St. Dmitry's Day is celebrated on October 25, but here it coincides with St. Dmitry's Day according to Julian Calendar: November 8 is St. Mikhail Day (*Arkhangelovden*).
6. See (Raychevski 1998: 45).

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