

*Research*

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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## **DIFFERENT NEIGHBOURS – DIFFERENT BORDERS**

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**Abstract.** The subject of the article is the ethnic boundary maintenance. It focuses on shared criteria for evaluation and judgment or cultural differences which can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence according to Frederic Barth. Ethnographic fieldwork is a very suitable way for the identification of the cultural evaluations and the boundary maintaining mechanisms. It is constructed through the living experience in a social and cultural environment as well as the historical context. The article presents life cycle celebrations (birth, marriage and funeral customs) considering that heritage process of the main cultural differences is seen most clearly in family through socialization. The examples are from two villages in Northeast Bulgaria where compact groups of Bulgarian Muslims – Sunnis and so-called Pomaks live.

**Keywords:** borders, Bulgaria, Islam, folklore, Pomaks

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People live together with different neighbours and they have perceived their cultural values identifying themselves as members of an ethnic group. Ethnicity is an integral part of cultural identity which defines the values, attitudes and general perception of the environment. Cultural/ethnic identity as well as personal identity always materializes in relations to somebody else. When members from an ethnic group interact with others this entails criteria for determining membership and ways for displaying affiliation to certain common values.

The subject of the report is the ethnic boundary maintenance. In other words which are the shared criteria for evaluation and judgment or cultural differences, which can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence according to Frederic Barth (Barth, 1969). According to Barth:

[B]oundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them.... categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories. Secondly, one finds that stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses" (Barth, 1969, pp. 9-10).

The boundary maintenance mechanism has much in common with the different types of borders. Beginning a conversation on "borderli-ness" Sarah Green<sup>1)</sup> used the ideas of lines, traces and tidemarks. The three concepts describe the nature of borders in different way from a range of angles. The idea of the border as a line evokes a sense of two sides unlike the idea of trace which causes a feeling of a time. In most cases traces are not visible. Usually

they are partial, fractional or they are a small fragment of the whole entity. Tidemarks are something between lines and traces blending the concepts of a place and time.

Accepting that the border is “both a conscious and unconscious domain, both visible and invisible..., multi-form, representable and unpresentable, known and unknown”.<sup>2)</sup> I will try to present some thoughts about how we can think and look on boundary maintenance.

The boundary is created not only as limited, restricted, or straitened; in my opinion the boundary gives peace, confidence, sureness and security. Knowing “who am I”, from which group you are/ I am part, is important for the sense of ethnic identity. Boundary maintenance mechanism is strongly bound with the ethno-cultural identity sense. When the boundaries are changing or are not maintained as strictly as before, the ethno-cultural identity is changing too. This does not mean that ethno-cultural identity has totally changed but had rather adapted.

Interaction between people is determined largely by inherited ethno-cultural behaviour. Cultural differences exist and play important role in inter-ethnic contacts especially in small villages and towns.

Ethnographic fieldwork is a very suitable way for identification of the cultural evaluations and the boundary maintaining mechanisms. It is constructed throughout the living experience in a social and cultural environment as well as the historical context. The report will focus on family celebrations (mainly wedding customs) considering that heritage process of the main cultural differences is seen most clearly in family through socialization. The examples are from some villages in Northeast Bulgaria where compact groups of Bulgarian Muslims – Sunnis and so-called Pomaks<sup>3)</sup> live.

The official term used for this group is “Mohammedan Bulgarians”. It is rather a literary term for people who cannot be separated in an ethno-cultural or ethnographic group because they have similar linguistic and cultur-

al characteristics like different regional groups of the local Christian population they live together with (Райчевски, 2004). They are called by various names in the different geographic areas in Bulgaria. In the Rhodopa Mountain they are known as "Ahryani", in Macedonia as "Torbeshi", "Murvatzi" or "Miyatzi"; to the north of Stara Planina – "Pomaks". According to Stoyan Rajchevski the Mohammedan Bulgarians do not possess a uniform name or nickname. Gradually the name "Pomaks" through literature began to be considered as the name for the Mohammedan Bulgarians to the south of Stara Planina. After all they did not use this name as a self-name (Райчевски, 2004).

But my field work data shows that the people who are migrants from Rhodopes Mountain and from Macedonia call themselves "Pomaks", named their language "Pomak" language, their music "Pomak" music and etc.

There are two main case studies. The first one is from the villages of Malomir and Nova Bjala reka situated within the Vurbica municipality. The second one is form the village of Drenici, Venec municipality. Venec and Vurbica are part of Shumen region in Northeast Bulgaria. Nowadays in Malomir and Nova Bjala reka live mainly Pomaks and Muslims, and a few Bulgarians. In Drenici the majority of the population is Muslims who have been living with Pomaks for nearly half a century. My main informants are 21 to 86 years old men and women.

The ethnographic data shows different development in the ethno-cultural identity in these two groups who live with different neighbours – in the first case the Pomaks live with Bulgarians and Muslims and in the second case there are only Muslims.

The ethno-cultural identity is complex and quite often unclear concept which expresses both a sense of group identity and personal identity. Of course the personal identity could be different from that of the other group members. The core of the identity, i.e. sense of the "real self" remains more or

less unchanged until the end of life. The word "identity" itself comes from the Latin word *idem* which means sameness and continuity and from the beginning of the XX century is accepted and began to be seen in two main forms - psychological and sociological (Marshall, 1998, pp. 293-296). This "sameness" that is understood as objectively and subjectively is expressed in solidarity, shared traditions, common action and is particularly important for understanding ethnicity (Brubaker, 2004, pp. 33-35). Actually it manifests and develops from certain social actors in everyday social experience (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 220-228).

In other words, the everyday routine builds a sense of self-confidence. This is based upon shared activities with other members of the group. These actions differ from the actions of "others" that live next door and are transmitted from generation to generation. Major role in this transmission has the memory – so-called communicative and cultural. The constant repetition of the holidays and rituals is the basis of a reproduction of cultural identity (Асман, 2001, pp. 54-55). Even in written cultures holidays, rituals and customs are one of the main ways to accept ethno-cultural traditions.

In many cases, the obvious cultural differences shape the stereotypes for a given ethno-cultural group. It outlines the specific and instantly picture of a group of people with a standard identity (Davis et al., 2000). The ethnocultural identity is able to maintain itself by not destroying its essential characteristics despite contemporary development (Goulbourne & Solomos, 2003). But when it comes to living together various ethno-cultural groups show different variations of changes.

Therefore, all studies concerning the topic of ethno-cultural identity and its changes should be based on history and the living experience of those who have studied (Davis et al., 2000). Examining specific examples helps to uncover the direction of change in value systems and how this affects the sense of belonging to an ethno-cultural group (Елчинова, 1994). This in turn

can show what changes occur in boundary maintenance which may lead to significant changes in the ethno-cultural identity generally.

Definitely one of the best ways to show how the boundary maintenance has been changed is to consider specific examples. The use of categorical signs like language, religion, national origin, customs, traditional clothing, and food is very useful in ethnographic field work. These signs could be very comfortable for us to see how the informants adopted the ethnicity. That is an expression of the form of inheritance and transformation of socio-anthropological reality (Живков, 2001, p. 166).

But to see relation between these categorical signs and the boundary maintenance I discuss specific ethnographic data from Malomir, Nova Bjala reka and Drenici. Actually I felt the invisible border myself while I was in these villages. When I talked to Pomaks, the Turks looked at me from distance and vice versa. These days there are no differences between young Turks and Pomaks. They look similar. Wear almost the same clothes, most of them purchased from the weekly market. They eat the same food. Some of the young people do not eat pork, but most of them drink alcohol. There is a strict gender work separation.

Mixed marriages are no longer seen as something totally unacceptable. Of course the parent's preference is their children to marry a partner from the same ethno-cultural group or to Turk, Pomak or Bulgarian, but not to Gypsy. Gypsies are equally unacceptable to all. Calling someone of them Gypsy is an insult. This case is indicative of the relationship between Turks and Pomaks at Nova Bjala reka village when the Pomaks call "Gipsy" to Turks. As my Turkish informants shared "The Bulgarians do not insult us so". We could still say that that "mixed marriages are undesirable reality" as several centuries ago, but at the same time not seldom practiced (Карамихова, 1993).

For a little more than half a century there has been large migration changes in the surveyed villages. The Bulgarians migrate to the city (in gen-

eral to Shumen or villages near Shumen). This is time of the beginning of the communist period when the so called collectivization of the land begins. Bulgarians sell their houses to the Pomaks coming from the Rhodopi Mountain or Blagoevgrad region. They gradually become more and more and set the stage of new forms of inter-ethnic contacts and relations.

The Pomaks were for the most part forced to live basically the same live and accept the same standard as the Turks. They had to work in TKZS (cooperative farm). But they largely retain their habits and affinity for livestock. In Nova Bjala reka and Malomir the Pomaks prefer to communicate with each other and fail to integrate with the Turks. The common Muslim religion is insufficient factor in bringing them together. The Turks said "We have lived mixed with Bulgarians. We have celebrated holidays together. We did everything together. We went on trips and slept together...I still do not enter the house of a Pomak!". This means not only visits for holidays but for daily visits which means drinking brandy (rakia) and wine and eating pork during the winter. This is quite unusual for the Pomaks.

In Drentsi the situation is quite different. The village was founded by Turks and they have always been the majority population there. They didn't have close contacts with Bulgarians and didn't have their habits especially drinking alcohol, eating pork and wearing modern clothes. When the Pomaks settled there, the only difference between the two ethno-cultural groups was the language. The Pomaks very quickly began to speak Turkish. Their children actually do not speak "Pomak". In this case the minority voluntarily adopted the language of the local macro society. The similar values and Muslim religion also contribute to rapid voluntary assimilation, but they protect some group symbols as a latent granted (Карамихова, 2014, p. 39). It is felt particularly in the choice of marriage partner and premarital communication which happens mainly to the Pomak weddings where all Pomaks are invited.

The first contact is through language. The first and so intriguing thing, which made an impression, was when a Pomak family from Malomir was preparing to take a bride and to negotiate for future wedding in Drenci with another Pomak family, the language. They were welcomed in Turkish, which evoked a negative reaction from the son-in-law. The old grandmother from Drenci said “I’m Turkish”, because she speaks Turkish. The bride explained “we (the Pomaks) are less in number therefore we must comply”. But this couldn’t be accepted as normal by Malomir’s Pomaks.

However, in some cases, the new communist policy to unification had the opposite effect: ethno-cultural identities became emphasized and polarization on ethnic grounds was increased. These developments set the scene for the inter-ethnic relations between the Pomaks and their neighbors. The character of the Pomak ecological adaptation, their economy and their cultural life has undergone dramatic changes during a relatively short time. I’ll include a minimum of information on the way of life of the Pomaks and concentrate on the description of neighbor contacts in order to indicate the nature of interaction and mechanisms of boundary maintenance in the area.

Boundary maintenance is felt mostly in family holidays. Because of the Muslim religion there are no differences in funeral customs. There are almost no differences in birth customs too. But in the wedding ceremony many distinctions are observed, which clearly shows whether the wedding is Pomak or Turkish. Here are the big differences that indicate the boundary change according to the neighbors.

Of course there are differences in the way that the weddings have been done nowadays and in the past. The wedding customs which remain are so called *dakija* (giving gifts), *nikjah* (religious marriage), *dowry*, *kuna* (henna art performed for the bride which is made mostly in the Turkish weddings).

### **Pomak's wedding customs**

According to most of the people interviewed, the Pomak wedding follows the scheme: engagement – nikjah – wedding night – dowry – wedding celebration – dakija. Under the socialism the following scheme became normal: elopement – nikjah – wedding night – dowry – wedding celebration – dakija.

The wide-spread practice of *elopement* is the first thing that breaks the traditional wedding customs. Almost everyone were married thus because it was the certain way that the parents would agree with the choice of a spouse. This applies to both sides. The main reason for the elopement is the unequal material status, membership in the communist party or distance of the intended's village. There is something important in the Pomak elopement practice – the companion. This may be a friend or a cousin. The companion remained in the groom's house while the bride's parents give consent to the marriage. Sometimes this could take a few days. There is sometimes wrangling but finally everyone agrees. Separations and divorces are not allowed. Otherwise the children are left orphans and women become hussy.

After that the *nikyah* is signed. Then the young can sleep together because they are husband and wife before Allah. The next day the groom goes to the girl's parents accompanied by three or five relative people (men and women). He goes “*to catch the hand*” i.e. to kiss the hand of the bride's mother and father. That means that their daughter was a virgin. He carries a sack of candies usually about 50 kg. It's a very special and important moment followed by a feast and endowment. The endowment contains three things (for example vest, towel, socks or blouse, vest, shirt, it depends on the material capabilities). The following week the girl's parents go to visit the boy's parents and together they decide when the wedding would be. Normally it takes a few months until the wedding day.

The *wedding celebrations* are usually on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes the bride returns to her father's house to be taken by the groom. He comes on Saturday with his relatives and friends (again the cars must have an odd number – 5, 7, 9...). The groom must pay the bride's family to enter the house and find the bride. She is wearing a dress that covers her arms and legs. Her head is covered with a white veil under which there is a white headscarf. Nowadays the bride's dress often is short and there is only a vail on the head. The bride's family gives gifts to the groom's relatives. The *dowry* is displayed in the yard – when it comes to rugs, carpets and things like this, and in the room –when it comes to small things like slippers, vests, socks, etc. The dowry is divided so as to make clear what has been given by the bride's mother and which has been given by the groom's mother. The bride and the dowry are taken by truck. This truck is stopped by the groom's friends on the road. They want money and a bottle of whiskey which is called *juvenile law*.

The newlyweds are met by the groom's parents in front of their house. The mother-in-law holds bread under one of her arms, and the Koran under the other hand and gives them to the bride. The father-in-law hands some money to the bride and groom who come into the house stepping on white canvas with money, flowers and candies. This is done for prosperity and God's protection for the new family. All the villagers go to congratulate them. If they have not signed *nikyah* yet this Saturday evening the imam comes. After that they can sleep together like husband and wife.

On the *wedding night* the bride spreads special towel on the bed which then is given to the mother-in-law or to close relatives of the groom. The one who wants to see the towel should pay. Of course this is still important to the mother-in-law but normally she can require it from her daughter-in-law. Sometime the groom has the initiative to give this towel to his mother.

On Sunday the wedding party is prepared not only for the village but for the visitors from surrounding villages and friends. On this day the so

called *dakiya* is done. The male relatives choose someone to announce each guest by name and how much money they give. The female relatives do the same. The celebration continues until midnight with music and dancing.

There are no such practices in Turkish weddings. When the *nikjah* is signed matchmakers come to the bride's home to talk about the wedding. If there is money for guests (it means to invite all villagers) there will be a wedding. Some people even borrow money.

In the old times in Nova Bjala reka the bride has been taken with wooden cartful pulled by buffalos. The buffalos were painted in lustrous black and their horns were covered with foil to shine. The cartful was usually led by the father in law who would pay when the young boys, the groom's friends, stopped it. It is their right. The bride would have a painted face because there were glued decorations on her face. Her face is veiled. After the bride kisses her mother-in-low's knees and hands, the veil is lifted and the mother in law would put a candy in the bride's mouth. This is done for sweet life. Then the imam comes and the bride and the groom sign the *nikjah*. After the *nikqh* there are no forbidden things. They can sleep together. Of course it was very important the bride to be a virgin.

In Drenci the Pomaks make their weddings in the same way like their Turkish neighbors. The explanation is the same "*we are less and comply*". If the wedding is done in another village then it is done in the "Pomaks" way.

There were definitely differences in Turkish and Pomak wedding in Drenci. But nowadays the first thing that impresses is that Turks necessarily make custom *kuna* (henna to the bride) while the Pomaks no longer do it. In short, the custom consists mainly in the collection of close relatives, principally women, at the center of the village. The bride and the groom are standing in the middle – she sits on a chair covered with dense, decorated, red veil, and he stands up right next to her. The henna usually bought from Turkey. Some girls prefer to use coffee instead of henna because the coffee is washed more easily.

The henna or the coffee dissolved in hot water in a bowl is placed on a tray. There are some burning candles on that tray too. The women submit this tray from hand to hand from the older to the younger while singing. In that moment the bride should be crying. After the song ends the women henna the bride's hands and put some coins in it. She must use the coins for buying something for the firstborn child after the wedding. The henna hands are covered with red satin gloves like bags usually purchased specifically for this occasion from Turkey. After it is all over the groom brings the bride in his arms and carries her to a nearby fountain to wash her hands.

Another important moment – a wedding gift (*endowment*) – usually was done one week before the henna.

The Pomaks make their wedding endowment five or seven (must have an odd number) days before the wedding. The people and the cars by which they are going to the engagement or to take the bride must be an odd number. The *dowry* is still an important part of both the Turkish and the Pomak wedding. Here no differences were observed. In both cases it is viewed only by women. The dowry consists of knitted slippers, socks, vests and other household textiles and utensils. The things are arranged in a way that show which of them are from the bride's mother and which is from the groom's mother. There are still a lot of comments about it – which is better, more valuable, and more expensive.

Usually the Pomak wedding in Drenici goes for a day while in Malomir it lasts for two days. Sometimes the bride's father hires an orchestra for this important moment. Younger sisters and cousins stand at the door and ask for money from the groom to let him enter the house to find his bride. But more important here is for the bride to be taken and led in her new home before sunset.

Turkish weddings are made in a different way in Drenici. The bride is led off her home by her mother and father standing on both sides. They give

her to the groom while few women throw candies. They go to the groom's house where they are met by the father-in-law and mother-in-law and the close kin of the male side. The bride starts kissing their hands (only hand of the men and the widows. Then the bride has been donated.

Although there is much in common in weddings, Turks and Pomaks weddings differ significantly. I had not intended to mention all the wedding customs- in the Past and the Present. My goal is to present what is still important for informants, because it is the basic thing of maintaining the boundaries between the two ethno-cultural groups.

The first thing the informants themselves indicate is the elopement. Actually the elopement is practiced by Turks and Pomaks, but only the Pomaks bring a friend. This ensures that the bride and groom couldn't sleep together before the nikyah. Turks accept that a girl has married the boy, if she has spent the night in his house and others know about it. In this case there is a little uncertainty about the girl.

The second thing is the big Pomak wedding celebration which lasted until midnight. This is the time and place at which other young Pomaks are were introduced to each other. Thus it is a very interesting mechanism for keeping the ethno-cultural group - tolerating weddings between Pomaks.

But the facts show that the wedding custom gradually unify. As the informants said "*we do weddings like you, like the Bulgarians*". The customs change and adapt and they don't have the same meaning as before. Of course the *nikjah* will continue to perform necessarily as well as rituals like *dowry*, *dakija*, *kuna*, ect. will remain part of the wedding. It all depends on the place where the wedding will be done. Of course neighbors are very important. They could contribute to the preservation of the ethno-cultural traditions or to change them. So the crucial factor is the demographic factor. On the other hand in small settlements like Malomir, Nowa Bjala reka and Drenici the politics have important role in everyday lives of the people. It deserves to be the

subject of study in another article. It certainly has a great impact because depends on the politic whether the young people will stay in the villages and will continue to marry and have children.

## NOTES

1. [http://www.eastbordnet.org/wiki/Documents/Lines\\_Traces\\_Tidemarks\\_Nicosia\\_2\\_009\\_090416.pdf](http://www.eastbordnet.org/wiki/Documents/Lines_Traces_Tidemarks_Nicosia_2_009_090416.pdf)

2. <http://cdn.intechopen.com/pdfs-wm/33717.pdf>

3. I prefer to use the term “Pomak” with which the people call themselves and others call them too. There are many studies that explore Muslim Bulgarians from different angles such as: the identity (Karagaannis, 1997; Brunnbauer, 2001); the connections between the identity and religion (Троева, 2011; Кюркчиева, 2004; Кръстева-Благоева & Благоев, 2003, Кюркчиева, 2004); the pilgrimages (Valtchinnova, 2005; Karamihova & Vulchinova, 2009); the sacrifices (Благоев, 2004).

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