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ETHNIC DISCOURSE AND GROUP PRESENTATION IN MODERN BULGARIAN SOCIETY

Introduction

The study of the various ethnic and religious groups living in Bulgaria started only 10 years ago, when the democratic changes took place in the ex-socialist countries. Since that time various research projects in that perspective have been carried out in the social sciences and the humanities. The following analysis is based on data, collected from three such research projects in the field of ethnology. Methodologically these projects were orientated to developing discourse analysis in ethnological and folkloristic study.

Some demographic and historical data will first be provided before going deeper into the analysis of ethnic discourse in the Bulgarian society.

Today in Bulgaria, with a population of approximately 8,000 000, live different ethnic groups with Bulgarians making up 85.7%. In terms of religion, there is also a variety. The most widespread religion in Bulgaria is Orthodox Christianity. Data from the 1992 census shows that Christian cultural tradition is shared by the vast majority of Bulgarians, around 60% of the Gypsies and 1% of the ethnic Turks. The second significant religion is Islam, professed by the Turks, the Muslim Bulgarians (also known as Pomaks) and 39% of the Gypsies (Genov, Krasteva, 1999: 450).

Both ethnic and religion affiliation outline the ethnic diversity in the Bulgarian society. Here the discussion will be focused on three of the biggest ethno-religious groups: Orthodox Christian Bulgarians, Muslim Bulgarians, and Sunni Turks. The members of the first group form the national majority. Around 72% of them live in the towns, and 28% - in the villages. The other two groups predominantly live in rural areas. For instance 68% of the Turkish population lives in villages, and 32 in towns. The situation is similar with the Pomaks. However, the latter are very difficult to define in strict demographic terms because they identify themselves in different ways, as will be shown later. The Pomaks are ethnic Bulgarians, who speak Bulgarian and whose religion is Islam. This population lives for the most part in the less developed mountain regions such as the Rhodopes (especially the Middle and West Rhodopes). The ethnic Turks inhabit mainly two big regions - North-eastern Bulgaria (around Razgrad) and South-eastern Bulgaria (the East Rhodopes near Kurdzhali). Their mother tongue is Turkish.

The source research work was carried out in two regions where sufficient representatives of the three groups live together. One of these regions is the Razgrad area in the Northeast. Here the Turkish population predominates in many settlements, followed by the Christian Bulgarians, while there are only relatively few Muslim Bulgarians. Except for the main city Razgrad, which is an industrial centre, the region is rural.

The other region is the West Rhodopes, more precisely the Gotse Delchev area in South-western Bulgaria. Here the number of Muslim Bulgarians is higher, and in many of the villages in the region they form the majority of the population. There are only a few Turks, living mainly in three villages. This is one of the less developed rural areas of the country. In both regions tobacco cultivation is the predominant occupation of the people and the main source of income.

In historical terms, two principal points should be taken into consideration. One is the so-called "*Turkish yoke*", which began in the 14th century when Ottoman Turks invaded the Balkans. For five centuries the Bulgarians lived under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, having no political rights or independence. This was the period when the two most important minorities in today's Bulgaria were formed, i.e. the Sunni Turks and the Muslim Bulgarians.

The other important point concerns the modern history of the country. This was the socialist policy towards ethnic diversity. Socialist authorities tried hard to "consolidate" the nation by extinguishing diversity, in other words, by the unification of all ethnic, religious and social groups. In

reality, this was a policy of hidden or manifested assimilation, which culminated with the practice of changing names, first among the Pomaks in the 70s and then among the Turks in 1985-1986. The latter event was called "*the Revival process*", which was aimed at proving the Bulgarian origin of the local Turks. Basic measures included changing Arabic names to "Bulgarian" ones (including names of European character), prohibiting Turkish in public places (which also affected other groups whose mother tongue was Turkish, such as the Gagauz), prohibiting traditional clothing, in particular the women's *shalvars*. Both instances of forceful assimilation caused resistance, which in the case of the Turks in the late 1980s took a dramatic form. Their resistance became manifest in the so-called "*big excursion*" - a mass migration of whole families to Turkey, often leaving most of their property behind to start a new life in a foreign country. After 1989 many of these emigrants started coming back to their homes in Bulgaria. Nowadays migration to Turkey is low and only for economic reasons. However, the migration processes among the Turks, has led to some significant changes in the demographic structure of the regions where they used to live.

The Ethnic Discourse

There are three related concepts I would like to discuss further in the context of Bulgarian society. These are *ethnic discourse*, *self-presentation strategies* and *ethnic images*. To begin with, I would define *ethnic discourse* as any act of socio-cultural interaction, which refers to the expression of ethnic identity. This is based on the idea that discourse, as a communicative category, depends for its interpretation on the meaning which participants assign to it (Van Deyk, 1989:22). Here I am especially interested in ethnic discourse with regard to the strategies of self-presentation, which the ethnic groups under study develop.

In the last 10 years, ethnic discourse has become of great significance in Bulgarian society. One of the effects of democratisation was the recognition of ethnic and religious diversity, which had further intensified interethnic communication. When speaking of ethnic discourse in Bulgaria in the 1990s, it should be pointed out that this has not been a stable and monolithic process, even within such a relatively short period of time. It can be classified both in terms of social stratification (official and non-official, etc. levels of ethnic discourse), as well as in terms of time. In the beginning of the period ethnic problems were more painful and ethnic discourse was one of fear, intolerance and even hatred, which is not seen now. In this discussion more attention is paid to the day-to-day level of cultural communication in Bulgarian small towns and villages with ethnically and religiously mixed populations. Ethnic discourse at that level has traditional forms and well-established norms and principles. My analysis describes the everyday social basis of ethnic discourse as opposed to "high" socio-cultural levels (politics, media, etc.), or urban milieu.

The social level, to which the discussion refers, is of great significance in Bulgarian society. It produces a specific mentality, that of the villager or the small town dweller, which determines to a great extent the various interpretations of and reactions to political, economic, and social action in Bulgaria. Without going into a detailed description of this type of mentality, it can be mentioned that this investigation studies communities, which can be characterised as conservative, rigid, traditional, closed and self-absorbed.

At this point I would like to stress several points. These communities still have a living folk culture, which means that folk beliefs, knowledge, norms and values play a major part in social and cultural communication as well as in the formation of specific attitudes and ideologies. This explains why ethnic discourse is so often "objectified" in folk culture events, and why folk texts of various kinds are so widely used in it. In fact, everyday life is dominated by the folklore tradition (regarded as a system of values, norms, texts, patterns, technologies).

Related to this is the strong feeling of local affiliation, shared by the members of these communities. This feeling can even override the importance of ethnic and religious differentiation. Therefore, such terms as "*our Turks*", "*our gypsies*" are very popular among the Orthodox Christian Bulgarians. The category of "*our Turks*" includes the local Turks or, more generally, the Turks living in

Bulgaria, as opposed to those coming from other parts of the country or from Turkey. As a rule, "*our Turks*" has positive connotations in all respects, in contrast to the other used terms. Similar is the situation with "*our gypsies*".

Systems of kinship, including position, terminology and meaning, underlie and model the concept of local, ethnic and religious identity. Kinship and locality are the sources of the binary opposition "us/them", which is basic to a folklore value system and is expressed by means of the various folk culture symbolic codes. Everything points to the fact that in these type of communities the group factor prevails over the individual. With regard to ethnic discourse, this feature results in the fact that people present the attitudes and strategies of the group they belong to rather than their individual ones.

The concept of ethnic identity in everyday culture

The mentality at issue develops its own concept of ethnic identity, which is quite different from institutionalised scholarly or political concepts. This is how confusions and misunderstanding between officials and ordinary people often occur.

In social psychology and anthropology, ethnic identity is defined as a stable cognitive construction and a behavioural attitude, based on related notions of kinship, similarity, attraction, differentiation from the others, self-evaluation and self-esteem, a sense of common origin and historical experience as well as an awareness of biological and cultural continuity. The basic mechanisms which maintain an ethnic community are differentiation from the others and integration within the group. The accompanying psychological effects are self-confidence and trust in the other members of the group, on the one hand, and on the other, basic anxieties about safety and survival. Phenomena such as language, religion, rites, customs, cultural symbols, psycho-geography, myth and history, ideology, technology etc. act as amplifiers and expressions of ethnic identity (Us and Them, 1987: 19-52).

At the core of the day-to-day idea of ethnicity lies the previously mentioned opposition "us/them" with all its mythological implications. In traditional communities, the terms in which "selfness" is described are family, kin, village/town, region, faith, and ethnicity. In other words, kinship, local, ethnic and religious affiliations are to a great extent considered to be synonymous with self. It is essential in this respect to highlight the fact that religion is thought to be a prime ethno-differentiating and ethno-integrating factor. That is why religious diversity is often rendered as ethnic diversity. Actually, all forms of affiliation encountered above are more or less regarded as equivalent to ethnicity. As a result "folk" classifications of ethnic groups are much more detailed than the scholarly definitions.

Each form of community affiliation develops specific symbolic codes, by means of which the syncretic identity of the individual in traditional society is expressed. The basis for this syncretic identity is being a member of a certain collective, whether ethnic, religious, local or other. It is quite common for the communities in question to express ethnicity or local/regional affiliation in terms of religion. This is particularly the case for the Orthodox Christian Bulgarians: the ethnic or local "other" is always described as being of a so-called "*alien/other faith*". In addition, religious identity is described in ethnic terms, for example "*Turkish faith*" instead of Islam, or "*Turkish gypsy*" instead of Muslim gypsy.

It is worth pointing out that the use of the above-described "languages" of kinship, locality, ethnicity, and religion, varies according to the particular context, as well as to group preferences. Thus, for the Orthodox Christian Bulgarians, the preferred "languages" to express identity are those of kinship and ethnicity, while Muslim Bulgarians and Sunni Turks prefer the "language" of religion. To be a "*true Muslim*" is the highest position one could obtain in culture and society and this can only be reached after a long and elaborate process of socialisation.

Types of Ethnic Discourse

Two types of ethnic discourse can be distinguished in terms of the major strategies of the participants. In order to give them a full description, the following questions have to be answered: what discourse strategies are used by the ethnic groups, what determines these strategies, and how are they expressed. To do this the following factors should be taken into consideration: the process of self-

identification of the group members, their interpretation of the communicative situation/event, the influence of the other participants and the preferred "languages" of self-presentation.

The two major types of ethnic discourse are as follows:

1. Discourse of "exclusion", in which the aim is to distinguish and even draw boundaries between participants identified as members of a certain ethnic and/or religious group. This type of discourse is connected with certain symbolic situations and systems.

2. Discourse of "inclusion", in which the emphasis is on interaction, mutuality, unity, removal of inter-group boundaries. This type of discourse is to be observed in local cult ceremonies on certain religious holidays, in all kinds of celebrations, and of course, in everyday contacts.

Within these two general types a rich variety of concrete communicative situations can be observed.

Anthroponymy and name-giving traditions are among the manifestations of the first type of discourse. In folk culture the intrinsic identification power of the name is amplified. There it signifies the position of the individual in culture and society, correlating with his/her reputation within the community. In traditional culture the personal name serves to show not so much the individuality of its bearer, but his/her affiliation to a certain collective, such as the family, the kin, and the religious group. Former communist authorities used this fact in their assimilation policy.

Rituals, both folklore and religious, are another typical form of the discourse of "exclusion". Their nature of highly symbolic events, designating moments of transition or crisis in the life of the community, calls for a closer consolidation and unity of action and emotions among its members. Rituals mark situations in which the very existence and well being of the community are threatened by the influence of any "alien" agent. For that reason various purifying and protecting practices are developed in all kinds of rituals. One of them is the exclusion of anybody who is not a member of the community.

Marriage and related rituals are a very expressive sphere for the emergence of this type of ethnic discourse. In traditional communities endogamy is the prime rule with regard to all kinds of "otherness", i.e. local, ethnic, religious. In turn, weddings are ambiguous in nature. In the ritual, no outsiders are admitted, whereas the wedding feast is a joint gathering of all neighbours, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation.

Finally, death and funerals have the same ambiguous characteristics. To say a last good-bye to a deceased neighbour is an act of paying respect to him/her and showing concern to the mourning family. However, the funeral ritual itself is seen as something very distinctive in terms of ethnic and religious background. Muslim and Christian graveyards, for instance, are always clearly separated from one another. During the "*Revival process*" Muslims were forced to bury their deceased in the same place and after the same civil ceremony as the Christians. This evoked negative reactions from both sides, and remarks like the following could often be heard: "*I don't want my eternal home to be among strangers*"; "*I am afraid that when I die, I will become a Muslim/Christian*".

As for the discourse of "inclusion", I will only discuss one of its representative forms. These are the common religious ceremonies and celebrations, in which members of all ethno-religious groups participate. There are numerous shrines in both regions, such as chapels, monasteries, *tekes*, etc. of local or broader significance. They are dedicated to a certain saint, most often Christian, celebrated on a given day. These holy places are attributed magic power (healing, protecting, etc.) and standard ritual practices for evoking this power are performed at the proper time. People of various confessions and ethnic backgrounds take part in them, but no sign of differentiation or inequality can be noticed during these events. It is interesting to see how the symbols, typical of one religion, are "translated" into the symbols of the other in such a context.

Culture stereotypes and ethnic images in ethnic discourse

The cognitive patterns in traditional culture are highly symbolic and one is able to evaluate a great deal from them. "Neutral" information is the exception not the rule. In these cognitive patterns knowledge, beliefs, notions, metaphors and opinions intertwine to form group ideology and behavioural

attitudes. Culture stereotypes play a significant role in inter-ethnic cultural contacts. They appear either in the structure of (folk) cultural texts or in the form of "free valences" and are a basic means for expressing group identity. Their nature of evaluative, over-generalised, conventional, inconsistent and conservative statements is largely discussed in the specialised literature. Here, I would like to draw attention to the use of cultural stereotypes in the formation of what I call an *ethnic image*. This is a set of commonly shared stereotypical concepts, knowledge, opinions, statements (often prejudices), by means of which a certain ethnic group imagines and presents itself or another group in ethnic discourse. The ethnic image shares the characteristics of culture stereotypes. It is constructed by elements of various kinds, such as language, physical appearance, habits, rituals, feasts, religion, territory, origin, mythology and history, etc.; in brief, by all the cultural facts of ethno-differentiating and ethno-integrating functions. In practice the ethnic image is usually objectified by some of its components, according to the context. However, as a cultural construction and social-psychological unity it has a systemic character. This systemic character can only be discerned in terms of motivation and argumentation, i.e. how and why certain concepts of a given group appear, as well as how and why these concepts are used to explain certain behaviour. Thus the ethnic images appear as a cognitive matrix, which motivates behaviour. Consequently, they are a crucial component of strategy making in ethnic discourse. It is essential to highlight once again the evaluative nature of the ethnic image, which determine its systemic character as a cultural construction. The ethnic image contains the knowledge of a given ethnic community about itself or about another group, according to the groups specific axiology.

The image of a certain group is formed from two perspectives: from "inside", the group members idea about themselves, as well as from "outside", the way outsiders view the group. These, often contradictory, images of a certain group are in joint circulation in a community.

The conservative character of ethnic images makes them almost impermeable to innovations. It is interesting to examine how ongoing social changes, as well as books, films, media discussions are accumulated and modified to fit the "matrix" of the ethnic image. On the other hand, this particular trait is the basis for the ideological use of ethnic images. It can be politically motivated. For instance, representatives of the different groups claim that they used to be more alike in socialist times. Although sometimes used jokingly, this paradoxical statement has its roots in the official policy of assimilation. Every ethnic, religious or even more general cultural feature were not allowed to be publicly displayed: traditional clothing, customs and rituals, mother tongue (if different from Bulgarian), names of Arabic origin, religious practice, etc.

Nevertheless, not all similarities are as a result of official policy; sometimes they are culturally determined. For instance, Turkish informants often say that they have adopted the "Bulgarian" wedding ritual, but this is not really the traditional Christian Bulgarian wedding, it is just a part of a modern civil practice.

However, the democratic changes in Bulgarian society after 1989 have caused a demonstrative affiliation to everything, which is considered to be ethnically distinctive. These changes have led to the restoration of the balance between the various ethnic and religious groups, which was held in place by the folklore concept of "otherness". This is true particularly for the elderly generations, whereas younger people, who have been less influenced by traditional patterns, find it much harder to strike a balance to overcome ethnic tension.

On a local scale ethnic images are the basis of a non-codified hierarchy of the ethno-religious groups. The position in this hierarchy depends on demographic indicators, both local and national, such as the majority/minority ratio. Another factor is the "minor differences" effect: those, who are most alike, are most likely to be rejected as they could be mistaken for "us", or could pretend to belong to "us". This threatens the uniqueness and reason for existence of a specific group: therefore, it should not be allowed. It is only natural that positive characteristics are assigned to the "self" group, while the negative ones are associated with the "other". These evaluations do not have to be objective. There is a certain set of mythological binary oppositions preserved in traditional culture for the description of "us" and "them". The "other" is usually described as "impure", "bad", "harmful", "enemy", "stinking", "simple-minded",

"uneducated", "retrograde", "immoral", etc. The use of these terms varies according to the specific group and the context (including the local evaluative hierarchy). For instance, gypsies always "attract" the most derogatory evaluations by any other group. It is quite the opposite with the Turks and the Bulgarians, to say nothing of the Armenians or the Jews (who, however, are not a subject of current ethnic discourse in Bulgaria). Of course the amount and degree of negative characteristics varies with regard to the recipient's identity. The presence and the image of the researcher should also be taken into consideration, as most of this kind of research is based on situations where discussions on ethnicity are provoked. Thus the "frankness" and "openness", which was displayed by the Orthodox Christian Bulgarians, in contrast to the more reticent Turks and Muslim Bulgarians, can be interpreted not only in terms of cultural patterns of communication, but also as a result of 'being of the same kind' with the researcher.

The use of positive/negative qualifications differs considerably between the ideological and pragmatic levels. Theoretically the polarisation between "us" and "them" exists, however it is rarely applied in real life, to a familiar person or group of people. It is perfectly possible for a person to declare that he/she hates "the others" (the Turks, the gypsies, the Pomaks) but, when it comes to a neighbour, colleague or friend, to present them in a positive light (cf. the idea of "*our Turks*").

Moreover, the use of positive characteristics concerning "other" groups has specific functions in ethnic discourse. It gives a sense of objectivity and also helps the speaker's positive self-presentation or "image-making" (Van Deyk, 1989:). The function of self-criticism is similar; it says: "Yes, we are direct not only when we speak about others, but also when we speak of ourselves, and this is one of our virtues." But self-criticism is also an expression of high group self-esteem: "We are aware that we are not perfect, but we like ourselves the way we are, and the others should treat us accordingly." At the same time, a lack of self-criticism and an entirely positive presentation of "own" group is often a sign of low self-esteem, a crisis of identity and feelings of vulnerability, as is the case with some of the Pomaks.

Cases of Group-presentation Strategies

Now I will try to present the dominant characteristics of the interethnic communication strategies employed by each of the ethno-religious groups under discussion, as well as to explain the basis of their formation.

East Orthodox Christian Bulgarians

They are the majority in the country, however in the areas under study they are in the minority. Both modernisation and economic crisis has led to their intensive migration to the cities. On a local scale, this has caused a demographic crisis, which has resulted in an ethnic discourse strategy, dominated by what can be called "the fear of the majority". This is a fear of losing the dominant position, both in number and significance. What are the components of this strategy? First of all, it is directed mainly at the group, which is considered to immediately threaten their safety in demographic terms - the Turks (in North-eastern Bulgaria) and the Muslim Bulgarians (in the West Rhodopes). However, there is a difference in reaction to the two "alien" groups.

Distinction from the Turks is more obvious and "natural", as they differ in language, religion, traditions. For that reason, in regions where the Turks are not the majority, they are seen as good neighbours, and mutual help and understanding are brought to the fore. However, when the Turks are in the majority on a local scale, they are considered to be a threat to "our" community. Their rejection as a group is usually historically motivated: "*My grandparents used to tell me stories about how the Turks tormented the Bulgarians during the yoke, so how can I like them!*"

As for the Pomaks, the case is quite different. They seem to be closer to "us" - speak the same language, have the same origin, also many similar traditions, only their religion and religious holidays, as well as clothing and food are different. Pomaks are considered to be more "dangerous" than the Turks because of the "minor differences" effect. Two major strategies are used to symbolically decrease this "danger". One is by showing that "they" are a part of "us". This is the origin of the popular motif that the

Pomaks are Bulgarians, who have lost their religion, but preserved their language after the Turkish invasion in Bulgaria. The very name "Pomak", in folk etymology derived from the verb "to suffer", shows an air of compassion. A lot of stories are told about families who were split up as the result of the forceful assimilation by the Turks: some family members converted to Islam and the others managed to hide and keep their religion. Even now one can still find "Pomak" and "Bulgarian" families with a blood kin relationship. (It is interesting that Pomaks never tell these kinds of stories).

These kinship ties induce tolerance and mutual understanding. However, they also call for distinction. First of all, in everyday speech, the members of this group are never called simply "Bulgarians" by the "genuine" Bulgarians. They are either "Pomaks" (which is often considered pejorative and avoided in certain situations), or "the Muslims" and "the Mohammedans". In addition, they are of a different temperament, as a rule not as good as "us". They are seen to be extremely conservative, very closed within their community, and even unfriendly to the "others". They are also hypocritical, try to bribe everybody (doctors, lawyers, clerks), mistreat their women; they are uncivilized, stubborn and naïve, and they also stink because of the food they traditionally eat.

Of course in the Pomak image there are also positive characteristics, however these are often used in such a way as to emphasize again that they are not as good as "us". For instance, Pomaks work very hard, but they do not know how to enjoy life; they are modest, honest, respectful to the old people, but they are also a very closed community, even hostile to the others; they get married "on time" and have a lot of children, which is positive but also means that they are not able to do anything better; they demonstrate high morality but also tend to hidden adultery.

Speaking about the "others" is a good way of self-presentation, as a hidden or direct comparison is always drawn. But the way in which the group speaks of itself is also indicative. As a whole, Christian Bulgarians are not afraid to be self-critical, they show self-confidence and self-esteem and consider themselves the "model group", which in a way they are, being the majority in the country. The most preferable "languages" of self-presentation are kinship, ethnicity and local identity. The latter produces a huge amount of toponymy and toponimic legends, which are used to appropriate the common territory: "We know how the village was founded, we can trace back our family history to the very beginning of the settlement, which means that it is our property, something that belongs to us and we are attached to it". No other group shows such competence in local history and geography.

Sunni Turks

Turks are usually very reproductive communities, but their populations have fluctuated in number as a result of the intense migration processes to and from Turkey. Repressed by the "*Revival process*" policy they turned to Turkey as the "promised land" and whole families left their homes and properties to go and live there. Some of them succeeded in finding jobs and settling down, but many found out that they could not settle - for economic or sentimental reasons. At present their interest in Turkey has only an economic character (the so called "*suitcase-trade*") and the traffic of emigrants has reduced. The conviction that "we are more Bulgarian, than Turkish" became important especially for the older generations and more conservative individuals.

Despite emigration, Turks are not worried about being assimilated, whether they are the majority or a minority in a region. This is due to the clear and well-preserved role structure in the family and in the local community. This is in fact the source of their self-confidence, as it guarantees the reproduction of the group as a unity. It is no wonder, in this respect, that the family is their major means for self-identification. In the extended family, traditions and ethics are safely transmitted from generation to generation, which is a way to preserve "our" uniqueness and integrity. Religion is however the main "language" of identification. Ethnicity is seen as a "natural", biological characteristic, while religion, in contrast, is considered a prime culture specific feature. They may be born Turks but they become Muslims after a long process of socialization, thus to be Muslim means to have proficiency in culture, to be a part and bearer of culture.

In fact religion seems more important than kinship and local identity for the Sunni Turks. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that religious folk legends are very popular among all Muslims in Bulgaria, but not among the Christians. This is not related to their stronger religious feelings. On the whole, all people in Bulgaria are more atheistic than religious. Religion is interpreted rather as a part of tradition, a way to express identity, than as faith and doctrine. The general strategy of the Turks in ethnic discourse can be described in the following way: *"We accept all the others, after all we all have the same predecessors - Adam and Eve, we believe in the same God, even though He has different names, follow His Scripture. But still Islam is the latest and truest religion and the Koran is the final and best holy book."* The hint of superiority is easily perceptible. The positive descriptions of the "others" are very much a result of the traditional norms of communication, which as a rule never express direct denial or negation.

This communicative rule is however often displaced by the "minor differences" effect. For that reason, Pomaks who are more similar than Christian Bulgarians in terms of religion and the related customs, attract more derogative remarks. "Pomaks pretend to be like us, so they threaten our identity. They are surely good Muslims, even more devoted to religion than we are, but this devotion is a bit too exaggerated, and it is suspicious after all." However, this negative attitude is implicit in the system of norms and prohibitions, or only paralinguistically explicit.

Muslim Bulgarians

Of all the three groups Pomaks seem to hold the worst position - they resemble one or the other group in different ways and are rejected by both. This can easily lead to feelings of vulnerability and frustration among them. But it is not only the imposed negative image that gives birth to such feelings, it is also the inability to describe "our" identity in definite terms. Pomaks are the group, which suffers a crisis of identity. As the "others" build up barriers between "themselves" and "us", it is only natural for "us" to feel uncertain or threatened about "our" own identity. Christians say: "Yes, they are Bulgarians but not exactly"; Turks state: "Pomaks are Muslims but not as true as we are". So an existential question for the Pomaks becomes "Then who and what are we?"

There are three principal ways in which Muslim Bulgarians solve their identity problem. These strategies vary according to region and age. The first way is not to distinguish between Christian and Muslim Bulgarians, to forget about traditions and religion, which are not so significant in their lives anyway. These people are more modern and urban oriented, and share the same cliché about Pomaks as the Bulgarians ("Pomak" as a synonym of simple-minded and uncivilized person). The Muslim Bulgarians who share the second strategy define themselves as Turks. These are relatively the smallest group, which thus expresses its reaction to former discriminative politics. They are, however, acknowledged by no one as Turks, for the simple reason that they do not speak the language. The last most distinctive, and perhaps largest, group are the Muslim Bulgarians who try to create a different, unique and genuine identity: *"We are direct descendants of the first (proto-) Bulgarians, we have best preserved the genuine Bulgarian language and customs, and in that way we are more Bulgarians than the Bulgarians themselves."* This latter group of Pomaks try very hard to achieve inner consolidation of their community as a response to the "others'" attempts to isolate them. The consolidation is a way to prove the group's own virtues and abilities. As a result this often leads to the formation of relatively closed and very conservative communities. Their strategy in ethnic discourse is dominated by "the fear of the minority" (and minority is interpreted here more in terms of inferiority, than of number). This is the fear that "we" might be rejected, neglected, underestimated by the "others". The Muslim population in the West Rhodopes predominantly shares this strategy.

This strategy leads to the following effects. Firstly, Pomaks try very hard to compete with the others, to prove that they are better, if not the best - by acquiring higher education, by achieving a high standard of living (money, houses, furniture, etc.).

Secondly, ethnic identity is religiously expressed, i.e. religion is the major "language" of identification. As there is no well-preserved family memory that goes back more than two generations, traditionally passed on stories, mythological or historical in nature, about the origin of the Pomaks are rare, except for the standard motif of a historical background that they were forced to convert into Islam. However, Pomaks do not like to turn over and over to this motif for various reasons: because it shows them more or less as traitors, or because they do not want to be considered as distinct from Christian Bulgarians. One can find, however, many religious legends, which depict Mohammed as their true predecessor and in some of these legendary tales he is also said to have been born in a local village. Religion seems to be the only distinct and firm identification factor for the Pomaks, and that is why they tend to turn it into an ethnic category. In this respect it is worth mentioning that the Pomaks in the West Rhodopes prefer to be referred as "Muslims" and "Mohammedans".

Thirdly, a tendency toward self-reflectiveness and to extreme constraint towards the others can be observed among them. They always try to present their group in the best way. This also includes a total lack of self-criticism; "We may have some bad features but we should keep them to ourselves and never speak about them in front of strangers." This is a manifestation of striving to prove "ourselves", regardless of "the others" that may laugh at "us".

The identity crisis of the Pomaks also gives rise to a conflict between the generations. Younger people try to merge with the modern, civilized people in the big cities. They try not to distinguish themselves from the Christian Bulgarians. Many of them kept the "Bulgarian" names even when they were allowed to regain their original names. More often than not members of the same family have different family names - the elder with their Arabic surnames, and the younger with their "Bulgarian" versions. Young people also deny traditional norms and ways of living and often migrate to the big cities where they are anonymous, so nobody says they are not like the majority of the Bulgarians.

In this article I have tried to give a representative view of the ethnic situation in Bulgaria at present, regarding in particular three of the biggest ethno-religious groups. However, my analysis is situationally bound, based on observations held in two regions with specific demographic structures. In other areas of the country and especially in an urban setting a wider variety of interethnic communication strategies may be developed. Referring to day-to-day patterns of cultural interaction, this research is eventually aimed at revealing the psycho-social motivation of tolerance and mutual understanding that have proved to be dominant in the relations between the members of the studied groups. For the Bulgarian ethnologists now it is a prime task to examine whether, to what extent and how socio-political processes have influenced these traditionally set patterns of peaceful coexistence in multiethnic communities.

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