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THE WOMAN IN THE FAMILY AND PUBLIC LIFE
- in the example of the village of Melnica -

Abstract: The village of Melnica (read: Melnitsa) is situated in the region of Azot, near Veles, Central Macedonia. As an endogamous community it is already an interesting example through which one can perceive several aspects of the social, economic and ritual structure, especially in the recent condition and status of the woman in the public and family life as a part of the rural existence.

Key words: Woman, family, public life, Macedonia, forced Macedonian Islamic converts.

The people who live in Melnica are forced Macedonian Islamic converts, that is Islamized Miyacs (Mijaci), who at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century¹ from the villages near Mala Reka in West Macedonia colonise the four Miyac oases in the area around the town of Veles, in the centre of the big Brsyac (Brsjaci) community. With the immigration, being surrounded by Brsyac villages, completely extraneous to them, they isolated themselves and thus were separate, and they developed in their own way as a syncretic composition of a strong pre-Islamic tradition and Islamic common law. It is confirmed by the field research as well, that is the data provided by the informers with still fresh memories of the older generations who used to celebrate some holidays from the orthodox folk calender as well, such as Spasovden (Ascension Day), Duovden (Pentecost (Whitsun)), Petkovden etc.

Two of these villages (Oreshe and Papradishte) are populated with Miyacs – Christians (Orthodox), and two villages (Gorno Vranovci and Melnica) with Islamized Miyacs who received Islam in the second half of the nineteenth century. The area of Reka was Islamized by the Pasha of the Prizren “sandzhak” (a county), Sinan-Pasha.²

From the village of Gorno Vranovci during the first 50 – 60 years of this century, as with most of the villages with Islamized Macedonians, the Islamized Miyacs also migrate to Turkey, and in their place, the village is colonised by Albanians from Kosovo and the villages Gorno Jabolchishta and Dolno Jabolchishta. The village Melnica is the only village with Islamized Macedonians – Miyacs who live as a compact whole up to present day. Melnica is a migrant worker’s village from which a great part of the population work abroad. However, every year, during the summer months, they return to their village, especially the young boys and girls for the purpose of:

1. Maintaining contact with their original community (an uninterrupted connection with the birthplace of their ancestors, a visit to their relatives and friends who live in the village, restoration of the native house in the village, a visit to the cemetery where their ancestors have been buried, with a purpose of renewal and continuation of the connection with them), or otherwise they would experience a crisis in their personal identity, because where they live, and that is out of their home community, some other principles rule, that is, the order of those “yonder”, the others, reigns, an order that is mostly unknown to them.

2. Contact among the youth:

- contact between the youths who emigrated from the village with the youths who live in the village, and

¹ Zdravev Gjorgji, *Tekstilnoto narodno tvoreshstvo i narodnata nosija vo Titovveleshko, Makedonski Folklor*, God. XXI, Skopje 1988, br. 42, p. 271; D-r Smiljanic Toma, *Mijaci, Gorma Reka i Mavrovsko Polje, Srpski Etnografski Zbornik*, Knj. 35, Naselja i poreklo stanovništva, knj. 20, SKA, Beograd 1925, p. 41; Traichev Georgi, *Kniga za Mijacite (istorisko-geograficheski ocherk)*, Sofija 1941, p. 248-256.

² Petreska Vesna, *Proletnite obichai, obredi i veruvanja kaj Mijacite*, Skopje 1998, p.20; Matkovski Aleksandar, *Islamizacijata kako metod na pacifikacija na Deparskiot kraj, Zbornik Makedonci Muslimani*, Skopje 1987, p. 37-59.

- contact between the youths who emigrated from the village (because they live in various parts of the world, and in that way they manage to see each other and establish closer contact), and thus they would meet the principles of the endogamous community, that is to say,

3. Contracting marriages among the youth, an institution by which the continuation of the kin and existence of the community as a closed institution is provided. Interesting is the example of the bride whose “svabda” (an incorrectly spelled form of the word that means “wedding”; the right spelling would be “svadba” – translator’s remark) we attended; she had come back from France, where she had been living until then, to marry a young man from the village.

During the field researches that had been conducted through the summer of 1999, certain segments of the folk existence had been observed, and in that context the question of the culture of the woman in the social – religious life became especially striking, as well as that of the role of the woman in the family life.

We would review the function of the woman in the public social – religious life at a few levels, mainly through examples. Thus:

First, at a level of participation of the woman in the functioning of the public social life of the village and her position in the making of decisions important for the village. The life of the Melnica women is brought down to the family circle, the house and the yard. Women are seldom seen in the middle of the village. In public, in the streets of Melnica, they move in groups, and each of them is under a “terlik”, hiding her own identity. The contemporary traditional costume for going out in public of the Melnica women – “terlik”, according to the information obtained on the field, is a remnant from the complete “feredzha”. After the banning of wearing the “feredzha”, as for them, as a debt to their religion, the women have began to use the long black cloth cloak with sleeves and they still use it as a cover – costume for the head, that falls down and covers the whole body. Under it the Melnica women cover the head, and especially the lower part of the face, with a yellow scarf. The “terlik” is worn by all the married women and young girls from Melnica when they move through the village. It is not the case with the women from Melnica who live abroad. They, in the places where they live, do not wear a “terlik”, except for the older women, but only when they are in the village. The younger girls, when they come to the village, do not put on a “terlik”; some of them are even disgusted by the idea of putting it on. Almost an identical example, interesting for comment, is the fact that the Melnica women, when they go to the town of Veles, do not wear a “terlik”. About this issue we would give a few comments, why it is so:

- because they are out of their home community, and the pressure of the folk tradition is weaker there;
- because they want to identify with the outer, to them modern city world;
- because they think that they would make themselves conspicuous to the others, and by that they might disturb the order of the community of the others.

In distinction from the Melnica women who live in the village, the young girls from Melnica who live abroad move through the village freely, dressed in a modern way and not under a “terlik”. From the examples we can comprehend that there are two groups of Melnica women:

- women from Melnica who live in the village (in the home community), over which the principles of the folk tradition still have strong control, and
- women from Melnica who live abroad and are not so strongly influenced by the principles of the folk tradition, but by the stronger modernisation of the places where they live, so that the folk tradition does not treat the ones and the others equally. Nevertheless, these are only assumptions, which need to be investigated more extensively and thoroughly.

Although the wedding and the funeral belong to the group of family rituals, yet, taking in to consideration a large number of segments, are rituals of a public character as well. Therefore, we can divide them in to:

1. Actions in the ritual of a “closed” character, in which the woman is absolutely dominant – the woman is the bearer of those actions (at a wedding, the Melnica women take part only in the limits of the house and the yard. The women at the wedding sit around the bride and take certain ritual actions by which the bride is successfully conducted to her new home. The woman is, actually, the main regulating factor for the newly – formed marriage to be successful and recognised at all levels in the rural community. Outside of the house, the woman does not even exist as a participant at a wedding; at a funeral, the deceased is seen off only by men. Even the ritual dinner, after the funeral, is given in different houses for the men and for the women.
2. Actions in the ritual of a “public” character, in which the women do not participate at all, and the bearers of these actions are the men (going of the men “to godfathering” from the groom’ home to the bride’s home; taking the bride from her home etc.). These are actions that take place out of the home, out of the house, and with that the women are automatically excluded from these actions as participants. But, the young Melnica women who live abroad make an exception, for they take part in the act of taking the bride, which once more confirms the fact that the folk tradition does not treat equally all the members of the rural community.

At the field research conducted in the summer of 1999, in the area known as Azot, near Veles, we obtained excellent data, but still the data was not sufficient to explore an issue as complex as the issue of the culture of the woman. This is just an attempt to broach a subject such as this, and it is just a foundation on which, we hope, furthermore successful graduation works will grow.