

### Chapter 3 Somebody like you: images of Gypsies and Yoroks among Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims)

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was an important cultural legacy of regarding religion as one of the strongest markers of nationality – certainly stronger than language (Hupchick 1993). The divisions between Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia are an example of this.

If the Ottoman empire has an heir, it is Turkey, and different Muslim peoples often consider themselves as a part of the Turkish nation. In Bulgaria a large part of Turkish-speaking Muslim Khorokhane Roma, as well as Muslim Bulgarians, Pomaks, prefer to consider themselves as Turkish.

During my fieldwork among the Pomaks, however, I have often been told that it is better to give your daughter to a Christian Bulgarian, than to a Muslim Gypsy. The identity of Pomaks is so strongly influenced by their religion that a large number consider themselves a separate ethnic group and some even feel themselves an integral part of the Turkish nation. Their language and traditions are Bulgarian, their neighbours are Bulgarians and, in some cases, when their family had converted to Islam comparatively recently, they even have some Christian kinsfolk; but religion often turns out to be a more decisive criterion of identity – except for Gypsies.

An unpublished survey of the prestige of ethnic minorities and groups in Bulgaria showed that at the top of the scale were either Christian Bulgarians or Turks, depending on whether the answers were from Christians or Muslims. Then followed Vlachs (Rumanian speaking, sedentary Christians), Pomaks (Bulgarian speaking sedentary Muslims), Gagaus (Turkic speaking sedentary Christians) and Saracatsens (Greek speaking recently sedentarised former pastoral nomads). All groups, sedentary or former pastoral nomads, Muslims or Christians, Bulgarian or Turkish-speaking, invariably put Gypsies on the bottom of the scale.

One possible explanation is the traditional distrust of the agricultural population towards non-sedentary people. Most of the population in the Balkans until very recently were peasants. Pastoral nomads such as Muslim Yoroks or Orthodox Saracatsens are nowadays usually lower on the scale of prestige than sedentary Bulgarians, Greeks or Turks, but sometimes even higher than sedentary Pomaks (according to a minority of Pomaks themselves, as I shall discuss below) and always higher than Gypsies (Adanir 1989:135). Besides, Khorokhane Roma, Lingurari and other Gypsy groups have been sedentarised for centuries now (Marushiakova 1992:99), definitively earlier than Saracatsens. The natural question is: what commonality is there in the image of nomadism held by sedentary people of these different nomadic or formerly nomadic groups?

Some groups feel the pressure of their low status and try to adopt a new ethnic identity. A large part of the Khorokhane Roma insist that they are Turks; Orthodox and Rumanian-speaking Lingurari claim to be ethnic Rumanians. Turkish identity, acquired via Islam and its associated politics may seem to offer the Khorokhane Roma (who are a considerable part of the Gypsy population in Bulgaria) a way from marginalisation to higher status (Marushiakova and Popov 1993:143). They are trying to imitate the customs and way of life respectively of Turks and Vlachs in Bulgaria. Neither ethnic Turks nor Vlachs accept that claim, so Khorokhane Roma and Lingurari remain Gypsy for their neighbours and solidly on the bottom of the ethnic scale.

#### **Editorial introduction**

*Within Romani studies we have to reconstruct for ourselves both the theory of ethnic identity and the theory of political identity before we can theorise with any confidence about the connection between the two. Iliia Iliev's earlier work on ethnic identity and political identity among Bulgarian Gypsies presented the beginnings of an explanation of political diversity among Roma in terms of informal networking and, in particular, of patron-client relationships. Debates which followed started him on a still incomplete broader process of theorising, about 'vraski' or informal networks of mutual, but not necessarily equal, protection. Here, therefore, Iliev draws again on his fieldwork to present a another codicil to the notion of sedentarism presented by Robbie McVeigh in this volume, by presenting a detailed account of one instance in which sedentarism might be presented as transcending ethnic difference in the social construction of ethnic identity – but not inevitably so.*

The Pomaks are those Bulgarian-speakers who are Muslim in religion. Until 1878, Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman empire, and some parts of the country remained so until 1912. The ruling monarch, the sultan, was at the same time *khalif*, the supposed spiritual leader of all the Sunni Muslims throughout the world. The population of the empire was divided on confessional criteria. For example, all Eastern Orthodox Christians were one *millet* (Rum millet), all Sunni Muslims formed another *millet*, etc. These were settled in different urban districts (*makhala*), paid different taxes and so on according to the *millet*. The lines of division were formed by religion, not by language or ethnicity.

When the idea of nation began to grow in the Balkan peninsula there

The Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks) from the Western part of Rodopi mountains are mainly farmers. The same families live for generations in the same villages, often in the same house and till the same lands. The mountain villages are poor and so there is a custom of sending young bachelors to the big cities or abroad to earn money. Before the Balkan wars of 1912-13 these young men were nomadic herders of large sheep flocks; they were in the mountains in summer and by the warm seaside in winter. There they were and still are several possibilities for young men to leave their villages permanently, but they do not. The temptation of these possibilities is one of the reasons why Pomaks stress so heavily the moral values of their lasting links with their native lands, houses and villages which is one of their greatest sources of pride. The mechanisms which kept the people in their native places were effective and survived even the great rural exodus in Bulgaria between 1950 and 1960. The Pomak settlements are now among the most thickly populated mountain villages.

### The Pomaks and sedentarism

One of the ways to stress the moral value of links with one's ancestral place is to comment on the nomads, traditional neighbours of the Pomaks, and emphasise the advantage of sedentarism. The archetypal nomadic stereotype now is, of course, the Gypsy. The Western Rodopi Pomaks often consider the typical Gypsy to be somebody 'black' and ugly, who roams all his life but also lives with dozens of his brethren in a ruined shack, who does not hesitate to steal but is a skilled blacksmith, lazy, hyper-sexual and without religion, even if he professes to be a devout Muslim. These images are deeply rooted and are not easily shifted by the facts. For example, there are no thefts in the vicinity of the Gypsy district in Dolno Drianovo village in Western Rodopi. The Pomak neighbors admit that, well, 'their' Gypsies are quite good, but the 'normal' Gypsies are ... and then the epithets above come pouring out.

Moreover, sometimes the image transforms the facts themselves. In the late 1940s a Gypsy family, Erlii (sedentary Muslim Roma) arrived in Dolno Drianovo village. They were former slum-dwellers from a neighboring town with no specialised trade. Like most Erlii Roma, the men, Djamal and Demir, had no particular skill, but the villagers *knew* that every Gypsy is a metalsmith by definition and so they had them repair their various tools. As old Demir explained to me, they had started out totally ignorant of smithing but over the years had acquired the necessary skills. So now in Dolno Drianovo there is a small Gypsy district of specialised blacksmiths who have clients from all the neighboring villages. Thus the image of Gypsies has moulded to a considerable extent the life of Dolno Drianovo Gypsies. Or, to put it another way, the facts adapted themselves to the image.

These stable images exercise an enormous influence on the Gypsies' life. A logical question to ask, therefore, is whether this cycle of reinforcement between stereotype and reality can be changed. This chapter takes the example of a similar image given by Pomaks to another nomadic group, the Yoroks (a pastoral-nomadic Turkic Muslim group) in Western Rodopi, to explain how and why it changed. My aim is to trace some details of the common stereotypes of Gypsies and Yoroks in Skrebatno, Valkosel, Dolno Drianovo, Laznitza, Godesevo and Garmen villages. I need hardly

say these stereotypes do not portray their real characteristics.

As well as those who are their nomadic neighbors today, the Pomaks sometimes also speak about some nomadic 'shepherds' who could equally be Yoroks, Vlachs (Rumanian-speaking Christians) or Saracatsens (Greek-speaking Christians), who migrated (up to 1912) each spring and autumn, with their sheep, near Pomak villages. There were no serious conflicts during these migrations. The 'shepherds' paid in cash or in kind for the pastures, exchanged some small items with the peasants and departed. They had different languages and religions but for the Pomaks they were almost all the same. It is very difficult now to find any information about the social organisation, kinship-structure, folklore, etc. of these peoples. The villagers remember only the facts that they consider important. For example, in the early 1920s a group of these 'shepherds' was killed by some nationalist Bulgarian-Macedonian *comiti* near Valkosel. The peasants saw the sheep wandering about without shepherds and stole some of them. There was no retaliation and they decided to check what had happened. They found the corpses of the 'shepherds' with their dogs nearby, still running around the sheep. There is a "happy end" to this story as the villagers tell it. They took *all* the sheep and they still can tell whose family took more. They cannot tell whether those killed were Vlachs or Saracatsens. They disappeared as they always did, but this time they left their sheep.

The stories about the Yoroks blend with and are dissipated among the common memories about these typical and impersonal nomads. The details evoked in all the villages were almost the same. Everywhere the peasants remembered that the 'shepherds' had a specific kind of sheep, common to all the nomads but different from those of the Pomaks and adapted for long marches. Everywhere they recalled the kind of huts these peoples used, their clothes and how tongue-tied they were. Some of the memories have been washed away but some are clear. All the stories repeated in different ways that these people wandered all the time; they were not like Pomaks, they were different. The most detailed ones insist on this most important characteristic of shepherds – they were nomads. Their itinerary from the Rodopi mountains to the seaside (Nevrokop – Mousomiste – Leski – Koprivlen – Sadovo – Petralik – Linden – Vesme – Zarnevo – Eles – Guredsik – Kamarata – Prosetchen – Plevnja – Drama – Zdravik – Poreza – Kavala) is recalled with great precision.

The facts recalled in all the villages are almost the same but the comments varied greatly even in one village. Everywhere the Pomaks said that the Yorok women, like all the 'shepherds', had a specific traditional costume with hoods, oversleeves and leggings which covered their faces, hands and legs. The evaluation of this fact varied greatly, however. Some Pomaks said that the Yoroks, like all the wanderers, were so 'black' and ugly, that it was quite understandable they would hide their faces and skin from decent people. (Gypsies have the same reputation of being 'black' and ugly.) A minority of Pomaks, however, said that the Yoroks were the most pious Muslims, even more devoted than the Pomaks because their women had the exemplary virtue to hide not only their faces but also all the 'flesh' of their bodies. Interestingly, the people who said this were either some of the most orthodox old men or younger people whose relatives had moved to Turkey or planned to move there. They had constructed their identity

mainly around their religion and preferred the links with their brethren in religion from the other side of the border to those with their Bulgarian fellow-citizens with the same language and history.

As with women, so with sheep. Everywhere the Pomaks said that the Yoroks' sheep were quite different from theirs, leaner and more wiry, but the interpretations were again rather different. Some Pomaks said that these sheep were so lean because of their interminable wanderings, that in the end they looked more like homeless dogs than the normal, fat, calm and well-bred animals that would be a source for pride for any farmer. That is, the sheep are like their masters. But the minority Pomak group suggested a different explanation. The Yorok sheep were so well bred that they did not take even a blade of grass from another man's pasture and that was why they were thin. The pious man's sheep are as exemplary as his wife and do not steal.

Another example: as a rule, the nomadic group chose a representative to speak with the village authorities, to conduct the more important bargains, etc. The rest of the group did not communicate with the village people and all the shepherds had the reputation of being taciturn and rather reserved. The interpretations vary again. Some Pomaks say that the Yoroks were so 'savage' that they preferred not to communicate with civilised people. The minority, however, attributed their reserve to the Yoroks' highly developed sense of discipline and respect for the elders (unlike contemporary youth).

One final example: everybody agreed that several Yorok individuals would co-habit in one small hut. This often led to transparent allusions about their sexual behavior. The most outspoken bluntly said, "With the fall of night everybody in the hut took off their underpants." I heard the same allusions about big Gypsy families living in one hut. The minority of Pomaks, however, again offered a different interpretation. They explained that the Yoroks had not abandoned their old family values and so several generations of one family lived happily together, as the Pomaks themselves did in the old times.

This was the Pomaks' family ideal indeed, but it never was the Yoroks'. Moreover, nobody thought interpreting the big Gypsy families as closer to the ancient Pomak ideals.

Most of the Pomaks insisted that these shepherds were too savage to observe all the prescription of Islam, that they had no mosques and no learned imams thus they could not be considered true Muslims. These are practically the same grounds on which Gypsies are not accepted in the community of real believers. The pro-Yorok party claimed, however, that a hard life and continuous work made the shepherds better Muslims than the more spoiled peasants.

Thus, interpreting the same data, the Pomaks create two totally different images of the Yoroks. The first one is of a savage group without religion, of black and ugly people who cannot communicate with decent and civilised farmers and prefer to stay among their sheep, savage as their masters, except when they wanted to do something indecent. The second one is of a highly civilised people, an example for good Muslims, with sound families and flawless morals – so flawless, that they are transferred even onto their sheep. The first image has several traits in common with the image of Gypsies.

Perhaps the hypothesis put forward by Robbie McVeigh in this volume, that among sedentary peoples there are some common negative stereotypes about nomads, could explain the similarities in the images of Yoroks and Gypsies. The stable link with their native lands, homes and villages is one of the highest values of Rodopi Pomaks. This link is stressed in several domains. In folklore the ancestral house is the most sacred place. In economics this house and the family lands are never sold. It is the backbone of their identity. The Pomaks insist that they are the most ancient inhabitants of the Rodopi mountains, never migrated and were there before all the newcomers like Bulgarians or Turks. It is quite understandable that a group with such values may be that suspicious of people considered to be immobile by definition. So maybe the images of Yoroks and Gypsies are just variants of the same image of the uncivilised nomad. If that is so, however, it becomes interesting to examine how the important variations in the interpretation of the Yoroks' behaviour have occurred.

They probably have something to do with the big movements of population in the Rodopi mountains in recent decades. Their peak was the great exodus in 1989 but at the time of my research there remained a number of Pomak families who were still considering moving to Turkey as a viable possibility. Of course, this is just a hypothesis, which is difficult to prove in a totally satisfactory way because nobody recorded what the Pomaks were saying about the Yoroks ten or twenty years ago.

Migration, or the possibility of migration, provoked a serious tension in the traditional value system of the Pomaks. They had to choose between two principal values, their attachment to their ancestral homes and lands or that to the religion of their ancestors. Most of them did not favor the most radical solution, emigration to Turkey, but thought about it and had to find some moral sanction, some legitimization. Here they found the example of Yoroks, the almost forgotten people who moved but, nevertheless, were Muslim. Maybe this example was suggested from outside. Several Pomaks told me that Turkish radio stations in Bulgarian explained that the real ancestors of Pomaks were these same Yoroks, the oldest inhabitants of Rodopi mountains. I do not think that the principal aim of this propaganda was to solicit the Pomaks to migrate but to offer them a non-Bulgarian pedigree. The media helped anyway. Even if some help had to be given to independently re-ordered and interpreted by some of the Pomaks in a new way to become the image of a positive example, as mythic as the negative old example of the savage shepherds. They offered a moral legitimization for people who hesitated to leave their homes and to become dangerously similar to wandering nomads.

Of course, this is just a hypothesis. More important is the fact that an ethnic stereotype could be shattered in a relatively short period when there are the necessary conditions – tensions between values and maybe some help from the media. Now all Bulgarian society is undergoing a serious transformation which also needs its moral legitimations. The Gypsies are considered to be the most mobile and adaptable ethnic group in Bulgaria. We could learn a lot from those who can preserve their culture during different transformations and survive the changes without suffering shock beyond repair and loss of identity. Maybe such a positive example could change the present image of Gypsies.

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