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## THE ADAK CUSTOM OF THE YURUKS IN MACEDONIA

Yuruks, nomadic tribes from the territory of central Anatolia, started their migration to the Balkan Peninsula at the time of the first Osmanli conquests all through to the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. This ethnic group of Turkish origin settled down in the eastern part of Macedonia, where it has been living up to day, although significantly reduced in numbers. This strip encompasses Doyran-Valandovo, Strumitsa, and Stip-Radovish regions. The area is speckled with dozens of Turkish lowland and mountainous Yuruk villages. The most idiosyncratic, even nowadays most specific through their indigenous features, are the ones perking on the mountain Plachkovica, around the towns of Radovish and Stip.<sup>1</sup> What sets them apart in particular is their seclusion, that is, a relatively isolated and traditional life style in the neighboring prevalently modern conditions. The inertness with which they embrace contemporary technological advancements does not only stem from their traditional seclusion but also the environment they have been inhabiting: located in higher mountainous regions (600 to 900 meters), in not so friendly climatic conditions, and with no larger pieces of arable land, pastures, and woodland. Unlike the villages on the Radovish side of the mountain Plachkovitsa, the villages on the Stip side of the same, are ostensibly poorer. The factor that brought on the economic backwardness of these villages is their late electrification (some 20 years ago) and a recent building of a concrete road (built 15 years ago, and in some remote Stip villages, such as Gaber and Yonuzliya, it still hasn't been built). Thus, the domestic population eschews new technological accomplishments, which can be seen in their farming methods, practising of certain customs, material culture, architecture and furniture, and, most expressly, the costumes and accessories of their female population.

The Turkish ethnic population from the mountainous region distinguishes itself from the other Turkish population living in the lowland villages, which, also, during different periods, descended from the upper mountainous regions. However, this latter Turkish population does not consider itself Yuruk, or, rather, it is not popular among them to be considered Yuruk. A widespread practice among the young girls from the Yuruk mountainous villages is to get married into Turkish villages in the plains. This triggers off socio-cultural transformations manifest in the girls changing their costumes, cutting their hair short, and lately, though only in scanty numbers, getting employed (mainly in the textile industry).

The Turks in Macedonia have a custom known as *adak*-promising forth, vow taking – a very widespread ritual practice.<sup>2</sup> Although the custom is especially observed in rural environment, most notably in the eastern part (Doyran-Valandovo and Stip Radovish regions), it exists in the central part (Prilep-Bitola region) of Macedonia, too. The *adak*, that is a promising forth,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the statistical data from the last census (2002), in the Republic of Macedonia live 77.959 Turks, of which 4.061 in Radovish and its vicinity, and in Stip and around it, 1300 citizens of Turkish ethnic background.

<sup>2</sup> *Adak* – vow; Vow – votive offering – something you promise to give; Vow - Nezir, tövbe, yemin, adamak, yemin etmek; Votive - nezir olmak verilmiş. Ilustriran rečnik na angliski jazik Oksford, Mozaik kniga Nova, Skopje 2004; The Concise Oxford Turkish Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 1975

vow taking, and gratefulness before God can be fulfilled with blood sacrifice, slaughtering of a *kurban* animal (most often a sheep or a lamb or a young calf), as well as a bloodless sacrifice (guest reception-relatives or neighbors, merry making-*dzumbush*, a banquet consisting of food, drinks, and revelry= *sofra verilecek mahale cocuklara!*). The adak is observed on variety of occasions, and the most frequent are the following: going into the army forces, exchange of betrothal vows (boy/girl), baby shower, good health, leaving for or coming back from abroad, and, as of late, graduation, etc.

The adak custom particularly observed among the members of the Yuruk ethnic community in Macedonia is very picturesque and rare. Depending whether it is performed for the birth of a baby boy, it is called a *sünet* (circumcision) wedding, *sünet dü/ünü*<sup>3</sup>, and if the occasion is a birth of a baby girl, it is called a *henna* wedding - *kwna dü/ünü*.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, the adak is organized by the parents, that is spouses who are childless or do not have children for an extended period of time. Also, the adak is observed if only female or only male children are born in a family, and the parents wish it to be changed, or, again, if parents want to preclude death of their infants, in cases when it has become a pattern. Further, the custom is observed if children are sick for a longer period of time; in such cases, the parents take a vow to make a *sünet* wedding if the sick child is a boy, or a *henna* evening if it is a girl. The vow taken must be fulfilled while the children are still young (girls 1 year old, boys 4-5 years old).

The adak, a *henna* evening we witnessed, was organized by the Eminovi family in the village of Kodzaliya. It was made for their third-born child, a three-year girl. When the parents found out that the wife is expecting a third child – they already had a boy and a girl, they wished their third child to be girl and took a vow that if their wish is granted, as a token of their gratitude they would make for the girl a *henna* wedding, a *henna* evening. The mother, Merguzel, and the father, Emin, Eminovi live in the upper part of the village, in a very run-down house they bought at the end of the 90's from Merguzel's father for 6.500,00 DM. They mainly subsist from tobacco growing, an occupation performed mostly by Merguzel. Emin is a part-time sheepherder for bigger sheep breeders, mainly Vlachs or Macedonians in the neighboring regions, and in the past few years, along with many other young men from this area, he has been working illegally as a manual laborer in Greece.

The *henna* evening is one of the most important initiation rites in the lives of women in the Muslim religion when marking the transition from one social category to another – from the status of a single girl to that of a married woman. As an integral part of the wedding, this rite takes place in the house of the bride-to-be, and in it participates a large number of the female population, both on the bride's and groom's side of the family. In the past, when the weddings lasted 4-5 days, the *henna* evening was observed on a Thursday, while nowadays when the weddings are reduced to 2 days, the *henna* evening is organized on a Saturday evening. The *henna* evening of the three-year old girl Gulay followed the very same ritual scheme as that organized for the girls (brides) on the eve of their real weddings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This *sünet* (circumcision) is different from the other because a bigger celebration, that resembles a wedding, is made.

<sup>4</sup> In the village they are among the poor population because Emin spends the money he earns mainly on easy life in Bulgaria. Merguzel accounts for their poor economic situation brought on by her husband using non-judgemental words and finding an excuse in the 'specific temper' of her husband.

<sup>5</sup> The *henna* evening organized for a little girl does not include the jumping over three lit fires, which is done by the bride and other two girls, as well as the burning of the rags painted with *henna* done by the mother-in-law during the ritual of washing off at the village well.

Guests inviting for real weddings is done by a community member who is not related neither to the bride nor the groom, but is only their neighbor or friend; he is called *pekchi* in Turkish. For the henna wedding of the girl, the same duty is performed by an older woman who calls on the families in the village early in the morning and informs them that she is inviting them to a celebration. In return for the good news, the invited guests give her an egg, and the parents of the bride endow her with a small financial reward. On Friday afternoon, the father of the bride, assisted by a few other men, prepares halva on open fire in his yard. In order to furnish the last minute purchases, on Saturday morning the family members go down to the market place in Radovich.<sup>6</sup> Since the Yuruks from the mountain come down to the town in large numbers on Saturday mornings, the market day is called the “Yuruk market”. On Saturday evening guests come to the house of the bride’s parents, or in this particular case, the house of the three-year old girl. In the past, only the closes kith and kin were invited as well as neighbors, and friends. Today, however, these evenings have turned into big communal celebrations visited by people from this and other villages.<sup>7</sup>

The preparation and spreading of henna is made by young girls. First the hands of the bride, or the girl in this case, are covered with henna, then the feet. Before the henna application starts, on the right hand and foot is tied a piece of red string, and in the right palm is put a metal coin made of gold. In the course of the henna application, as well as during the washing off of the same, on the bride’s, or the girl’s, head is donned a red or pink scarf. Other present girls and brides apply henna on their hands, too. Hands and feet covered with henna are swathed in raw wool and rags and thus stay for the night. The henna application ritual, that takes place late into the night, is accompanied by singing and tambourine playing performed only by two women. The lyrics are related to the henna rite itself – *henna turkusu*, and mainly sadly reflect on the loss of girlhood. In this part of the ceremony participate only close female family members. For this occasion, everyone wears their traditional festive garments, reserved only for the most formal moments, great holidays and weddings. This traditional, rich costume is hand-made by women and girls even today, mostly during winter months. At night, in the house of the bride’s or girl’s parents there is a celebration accompanied by music and food for guests (stew, beans, halva, bread-bought in a store (*corba, fasulje, helva, somun – kasaba ekmeği*)). Some 5-6 years ago, the music for weddings and bigger celebrations was performed by paid *zurla* (a fold wooden wind instrument) and *tapan* (drum) players from the town; today, however, there are music bands that play electrical instruments.

On Sunday morning, the bride, that is, the young girl and her mother, followed by all the invited guests and music players go the village well, where the ritual washing off of the feet and hands covered with henna takes place. Around the well women perform several circle dances accompanied by music. The first dance is led by the mother carrying the girl in her arms. Upon returning home, the celebration continues with music and dances.

Just like at real weddings, everyone attending this ritual ceremony brings a present. The presents are mainly those intended for the dowry of the bride, but bought in the town: blankets, downs, *basma* (soft fabric), all sorts of dishes for the furniture, rugs, coffee cups, clothes for the girl, and other. On Sunday, at the end of the celebration, the presents are taken out and displayed for a show, each of them with the name of the donor on it. A family member is tasked with running the bridal shower is: he/she calls out the names of the guests

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<sup>6</sup> On the market place, Turkish is the language of communication; Yuruk women and children do not speak Macedonian.

<sup>7</sup> For the younger population from most Yuruk villages, the market days and collective gatherings and celebrations are an excellent chance to get to know each others and fall in love.

and exhibits their presents. This duty is performed by a person that has the desire and flair to run the show and be a good mediator.

Until a twenty years ago, this symbolical initiation rite, performing the adak –a henna evening for a young girl, was simply a domestic ritual carried out in the first year of the girl, only in the presence of the girl's mother and several other women.

The performing of the ritual, adak – promise, a debt is paid, that is a vow taken before the Almighty, God, carried out. By way of the supplication for a wish to be granted, good health secured, a promise is made that in return for the granted wish, as a sacrifice or gratitude of the parents, and in the presence of the entire community, an early wedding ritual will be made – a henna wedding for the girl. Most likely, the adak ritual symbolizes sacrificial offering – *kurban*, before God as gratitude for a good deed performed, good health granted, that is, a wished for child given. According to the tenets of the custom, the henna evening should be observed in the first year of the life of the child in a much more modest fashion, and only within the family circle. However, in recent times, especially the last twenty years, into the henna evening have been introduced modifications, such as the age of the girls, now between the ages 3-4, even 9-10.

Assumptions or interpretations pertaining to this phenomenon can be seen not only as a religious phenomenon more prominent in the last twenty years, but more as an economic, and above all a sociological phenomenon. Though the religious component is very much inherent in this Yuruk ritual, we deem that the dominant place in the practice of this ritual represents its social dimension. The economic dimension is present because of pragmatic reasons, the desire to gather data, as understood by most of the older community members. The sociological dimension focuses on the meeting of the need to show off social status (flaunt=*chalam*), as well as the need to stage collective celebrations (*dzumbush*). That, on the other hand, is important as a cohesive and integrative element of this community, especially in the last twenty years, when transition and economic impoverishment have taken place, not sparing even this isolated Yuruk community. The need for social coherence and introduction of some modern elements into tradition, as expressed in this rite, the adak – a henna evening for a young girl (changing of the traditional music, clothes, especially worn by men, food, type, quality and quantity of presents, etc.) is the result of the great impact of electronic media present in this environment as well.

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