

Aneta Svetieva (Skopje, Macedonia)

## FEMALE SENIORITY PRINCIPLE AND ACCOMPANYING ELEMENTS IN THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF MACEDONIANS

**Abstract:** The analysis of the field data shows that female seniority was in fact a cultural model, an organic part of the concept of the folk culture, established in its totality as a system of specific relations somewhere in the beginning of the 20th century. It is difficult to talk about the sum of reasons that influenced its formation. Surely, one can not exclude the influence of the economical factor, but they should not be separated from life in general in a certain period of time.

**Key words:** female seniority principle, ethnographic regions, traditional culture of Macedonians, population between 60-80 years of age, beginning of 20th century, contemporary situation, "sno-hachestvo"

In the Macedonian regions of Skopje, Kumanovo, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Radovich, Strumica, Pijanec, Malesh, Veles and Poreche, during field investigations that have been going on occasionally for 20 years, when the informants (both female and male), who were 60-90 years of age, were asked to give some basic data, information about the existence of a female seniority were often heard. The high frequency of these data had put our reflexes to sleep and did not give impulse to any special research interest. In this case, the rule that a phenomena that are something simple and usual in a certain environment, can be at the same time unusual and complex in another environment, had been simply forgotten. The problem popped up on the surface at an international congress in Bansko, when some of the colleagues from Austria, who were apparently not familiar with this phenomena of ours, have asked me "with Austrian preciseness" to give statistic data about the following sentence in my article: "...in the marriages of Macedonians the female seniority principle used to be highly present". A big discussion followed, and I received support from a younger colleague from Belgrade who did research in South-eastern Serbia, as well as from the Bulgarian colleagues, that did their research in the Pirin region and the Bulgarian Shopluk. It was obvious that they also did not have any statistical data, apart from their word of honour, that this is the situation with the female seniority principle. However, at the end, I was not satisfied of myself, because "I was blind with my eyes opened", because I did not notice this phenomena that is very provocative.

I still do not have statistical data, and I also can not turn back time, but based upon the field investigations, I claim that in the villages of the above mentioned ethnographic regions the female seniority principle was something usual until the beginning of the Second World War, which does not mean that after that it has completely disappeared, since even today there are a number of marital couples between 50 and 70 years of age where the wife is older than the husband. The basic question that I pose to myself regarding female seniority principle, relates to the reasons for this phenomena. The explanation that I had a chance to read<sup>1</sup>, that was given by some of the colleagues during the above mentioned discussion, is that the reasons are of economical nature<sup>2</sup>, that is, the reduction and disappearance of this phenomena as a result of the change of the type of production (agriculture, stock breeding), the transformation of the family (communal, three-generational) etc. However, this does not solve the questions related to female seniority principle, since these conclusions do not match completely the field data from Macedonia. Some of the existing thesis are directly contradicting each other. According to the results of the field research in Macedonia, the economic reasons were not the main ones, since female seniority principle was equally present or not present in the mountainous stock breeding regions, as well as in the valleys, that is, the agricultural regions. For example, in the culture of the Mijaks, stock breeding population that lives in the mountains, the female seniority principle is not present. It is not present even in the mountainous regions of the Mijak oasis close to Veles (Oreshe and Papradishte), formed at the end of the 18th century, although when it comes to the neighbouring local population from the region of Veles (manly agricultural) this phenomena is registered. In that sense, it is interesting how strange the informants from Oreshe look at you when you ask them who is older in the marriage, the wife or the husband, since in that environment it is a nor-

---

<sup>1</sup> Љиљана Гавриловић, Женски сениорат у браковима у књажевачкој области крајем XIX века, Гласник Етнографског музеја у Београду, књ. 62 (1998), 29-49

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 44.

mal thing that the husband is at least somewhat older than the wife. Since we do not have data related to the past, the question remains open if the Mijaks knew about the female seniority principle in the past.

Regarding the type of the family as a criteria for the existence of the female seniority principle, the investigations show that the number of the big family communities was not so high. The number of the medium sized communities was higher, consisting of 10-15 members. The fact that in literature we find data about big family communities consisting of 30, 40, to 60-70 members means nothing else but that those were more attractive for the investigators who worked in the '30s of the XX century. At the same time, the number of nuclear families that functioned according to the same principle as the communal ones was high. In all directly or indirectly examined types of families in the above mentioned ethnographic regions, the female seniority principle was registered, so that the size and the type of the family apparently were not a decisive factor.

Since the investigations that were going on for years showed that the investigator at the field should carefully listen, watch and register, and at the same time temporarily forget the things he/she had learned, I suggest that we go back to the data of the informants as an important source for solving this question.

A few interesting explanations of the informants, in short, state:

1. "The woman was older than the husband. I don't know why it was so, it seems she should have been 'a more dignified girl'. I am younger than my husband, but my mother was 10 older than her husband. When they married he still had not served the army, he was 17-18 of age, and she was 25. My brother also married a woman older than him. The other brother married a younger woman, my sister is younger than her husband...". "This is how it was in former times. A father would marry his son and he would say: there is a nice girl, 25 years of age. He would send a messenger who would ask weather this girl would like to marry. They would make a wedding. The husband would be shy, he would not want to approach his wife (laughter"... A girl of 25, with a dowry. Afterwards the boy would go in the army. This is what my brother did, first he got married, then he went to the army. It was expected that an older girl would give presents to everyone, would respect her father and mother in law, work and raise children..."<sup>3</sup>

2. According to another information<sup>4</sup>, it was usual that the wife is 10, 5, 4 years older than her husband. The father of the groom would pick up a woman for him. The criteria upon which the girl's parents made the decision were weather the groom has enough wood, water and a house. It was thought that a girl who is older would be able to work better, to make bread, to bake and to work in the field. If she was younger, one year would be needed to teach her how to do all these things. The girl would be married at 20-25 years of age, and the boy at 15-16.

3. "There were some questioners. One would go, ask, once, twice...Not like now, it has not been yet born, he dances and gives birth. I was 25 and again I asked questions. I was older than my husband. I say to my grandson 'get married, you are 26" and he says "it will happen granny, it will". Now it is like this: a girl of 17-18, 13-14, 15-16, she would get married to a groom of 20, 30. There are many examples that he is 25, 26 and she is 15. She was poor, came to work, and he deceived her. (In former times) the wife was older. If the groom was 15, 16, 17, 18, let's say 20 years of age, the girl would be 25, 26, 27, so that she knows how to make the bread, to bake, all these things. Those were good marriages"<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Own field investigations in the Kumanovo region of Kozjachija, 2001. Informant: Danica Bozinovska, born 1938 in the village of Bajlovce.

<sup>4</sup> Own field investigations in the Kumanovo region of Kozjachija, 2001. Informant: Kolevska Natalija (Tala), born 1931 in the village of Novoseljane, lives in the village of Skachovce, Kumanovo region.

<sup>5</sup> Own field investigations in the Kumanovo region 2001. Informant: Anga Stojkovska, illiterate, approximately 80 years of age, born in the village of Stanche (Kriva Palanka region), lives in the village of Skachovce, Kumanovo region.

4. I would not know. I was older than my husband. So why this was so...It was appreciated, it was not, I would not know.<sup>6</sup>

5. At that time it was important that the woman is older, at least three years older, but she could be seven to nine years older.<sup>7</sup>

6. The girl was married older because there were few woman and because of work.<sup>8</sup>

7. Women were older than man. Our women are older. The woman was expected to bake bread, to prepare lunch, as she was born in the house...<sup>9</sup>

8. The woman was older than the man. "It happened that the man would come to his wife and could not sleep with her, he could not do it so that his father would have to be involved"<sup>10</sup>

If we analyse the field data, we would see that the female seniority principle is in its basis a cultural model, an organic part of the folk culture established in its totality as a system of specific relations somewhere in the beginning of the 20th century. It is difficult to talk about the sum of reasons that influenced its formation. Surely, one can not exclude the influence of the economical factor, but they should not be separated from life in general in a certain period of time. Besides all other elements that support this thesis, the answers of the informants stating "I don't know why it was so, (that the woman is older than the man)..." are also a proof, and they are identical with the answers that we've got when asking about the ritual praxis ("I don't know why, this is how our ancestors did"). Starting from the assumption that the female seniority principle that has been registered in different parts of the Balkan was in fact a cultural model, we will pose the problem relating it to the divisions in the traditional society according to gender and age. In the traditional rural society of the Macedonians, the male principle dominated at the manifested level, while virilocality determined the model of the family. Surely, there is also so called "ustikorilocal" type of living, but when it is compared to the negative opinion related to the position of the "domazet" (a man who lives in the house of his wife), it becomes clear that no one desired exactly this model. On the other hand, inside the family structure, at the existential level, the position of the woman was not so bad as described in literature. Practically, there are rare examples of houses (families) where the male group has significantly more important role than the female. On the contrary, one can accept as correct the opinion that the female group held important position in the inner family system.<sup>11</sup> However, no matter the real situation related to the roles of the genders in the frames of the interior family relations, the woman always says that the man is the "boss" in the house, either the "old" one, or her husband. These sorts of statements show the publicly accepted role of the man as a dominant factor in the society and the family. In that sense, one of the publicly accepted dominant roles of the adult male family group regarding the family structure was the control of the female group. The sense of reality, that is characteristic for most of the regulative norms in different domains of folk life, makes us believe that the control upon the female group is related to the awareness about the importance of the woman for the future of the family (the gens). It seems that this awareness was the spiritus movens of the adult members of the male family group when it comes to providing new women. In accordance with the generally accepted virilocal model of family, the older men were obliged to provide wives for their sons. It was done at the time when the male

---

<sup>6</sup> Own field investigations in Poreche 2000/2001. Informant: Desanka Petrevska, born 1949 in the village of Botushe, lives in the village of Bitovo.

<sup>7</sup> Own field investigations in Poreche 2000. Informant Zivka Atanasovska from the village of Belica, born in the village of Debreshte - Prilep region

<sup>8</sup> Field research from the Kumanovo region 2001. Informant: Stojka Mladenovska, born 1928 in the village of Bukovljane, lives in the village of Malotino.

<sup>9</sup> Field research of Ljupcho Risteski in the Skopje region, 2000. Informant: Cvetkovski Velko, born 1915 in the village of Drachevo, Shtroski Panche, born 1923 in the village of Drachevo and Zafirovski Angele, born 1913 in the village of Drachevo.

<sup>10</sup> Field research of Nadica Petkovic, ethnologist, 2001. Informant: Ratka Antevska, born 1930 in the village of Aljinje, lives in the village of Bajlovce - Kumanovo region.

<sup>11</sup> D. Rihtman – Auguštin, *Struktura tradicijskog mišljenja*, Zagreb 1984.

child started to become a man, practically in the period of transition. Additional reasons for the prompt solution of this important family question, were without a doubt the life conditions at the Balkans, especially in Macedonia, that is, the realistic uncertainty of life and property, and in that sense the critical position of the male persons as the ones who should serve different armies. A proof of this statement is the fact that boys were married at 15-16, and then left for the army. On the other hand, solving the problem of marrying the boy earlier meant overcoming all unforeseen situations that could appear if the boy would make the decisions by himself. It was not allowed that the boy chooses his wife in a state of "love blindness", since it was thought that the bride could then misuse that privileged position of hers for destructive actions related to the family. The numerous beliefs that the mother in law "did some magic so that the young people would not love each other", supports the potential danger for the unity of the family in case of an overwhelming closeness between the marital partners. The man was expected to remain the "child" of his parents in all situations, and to prove his solidarity towards them in the course of his lifetime. This position of the husband can be noticed today as well - it is a relict of the past family relations. This is confirmed by numerous statements of women that did not succeed in making their husbands be "on their side", in critical conflict situations involving close family members - the husband would always be on the side of his parents.

Due to different reasons, all accidents related to the future of the traditional society and the family were not allowed. All risky factors that could negatively influence their survival were disregarded. Sympathy, love, attraction were just individual and temporary "earthquakes" that happened between young people in separate families, besides all undertaken measures. Those individual cases did not destroy the order that was based upon the application of the principle of "feelings turned off", when creating a marital community. It is a very seldom case that an informant knew his/her husbands or wives before they married. Vice versa, most of them saw their husband/wife for the first time at the engagement or at the wedding. The exclusion of the emotive moment when marriages were established in Macedonia was noticed by Joseph Obrebski who, around 1930, did his research in Poreche.<sup>12</sup> Among other things, he speaks about the "taboo" when it comes to the communication of the girl with her future husband. Starting from some higher European standard regarding marital life, he concluded that in fact the marriages in Macedonia are low in quality and having in mind the communal way of life there is not much sexual enjoyment, especially when it comes to the wife. According to his opinion, the only existing principle was the one of mating.<sup>13</sup> Besides those negative remarks, he noticed that marriage is anyway a powerful institution, since only in a few exceptional cases there was a separation of the husband and the wife. If we are aware of that the traditional society of the Macedonians existed in circumstances of continuous uncertainty of life and property, it becomes clear that the existential principle was the most important. In such unfavourable life conditions, one could exist only by respecting the principles of collective village and family functions. The family in the sense of functional company could not be realised without regulations, norms of behaviour, especially when it comes to the selection of women. The reproductive, economic and the social elements were taken into consideration. In the frames of such organic family concept, closely related to the natural one, of a group of people that fights for survival, the adult girl was highly priced. The young girl was considered as an additional burden for the family, or as one more child in the family that was anyway overpopulated. The family would gain another incapable member that should be taken care of. In that sense, the marriage of two "children" of the same age, and different gender, obviously was considered as a high risk action. Thus, the selection of the older girl was considered as a better investment. In that sense, the virilocal model of family, seen from the positions of the members according to their gender and age, in the investigated areas was based upon the principle of age as a guarantee for a lesser risk in accepting a new woman in the family. This choice was not based exclusively upon the wish for using the woman as a worker of the family. Above all, it is not just a matter of a communal family and the economy, but related to all types of family and different types of economy activities in Macedonia, until recently. Even if one takes the example of the broader family when it comes to the division of labour, she did more work than other women of the same category (sisters in law), in the frames of the female family group. On the other side, the amount of work did not differ dramatically

---

12<sup>12</sup> Jozef Obrebski, Ritual and social structure in a Macedonian Village. Research Report n. 16, Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, May 1977; Јозеф Обрембски, Фолклорни и етнографски материјали од Порече, кн.1, Редакција: Танас Вражиновски, Скопје 2001; Јозеф Обрембски, Македонски етносоциолошки студии, кн.2.

13<sup>13</sup> Јозеф Обрембски, Брачни неприлагодености и стабилноста во бракот, Македонски етносоциолошки студии, кн.2, н.д., 253-261.

from the amount of work that the girl had before in the house of her parents. However, she suffered from her servant position in the unknown family environment, especially in the period of transition from marriage to the birth of the first child. As the investigations show, that critical period when it was a matter of an older girl, was shortened since the bride immediately after the wedding would actively participate in all family activities. The informants also tell us that the older bride was a factor of stability in the family. This opinion was so popular that numerous, above all elderly women, still can not accept the contemporary changes and firmly believe that the former rules of selection of marital partner were better, and provided higher security for the family.<sup>14</sup>

We stress upon information n. 6 and n. 8. In the information number 6 the informants says that there were less female than man. This unusual explanation related to the reason for the existence of female seniority principle matches the statistical data from 1931-1994, which show that the number of male population in Macedonia is higher than the one of the female population.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, we don't have a number that covers a broader period of time. Maybe this situation of absence of equilibrium between the genders that is present even today was an additional support for the creation of that particular cultural model related to the female seniority principle.

The information n. 8 directly relates to the phenomena called "snohachestvo" as a result of the culture of the female seniority principle. Although we have a sufficient number of data derived from our own investigations related to this phenomena when it comes to the Macedonians, still there are a number of difficulties regarding the quality of information, due to the reluctance of the informants to give us realistic data. The reason for this is the contemporary treatment of incest in the law. The popular notion used to say that the collateral kinship was not an obstacle for creating a marital relation or other types of intimacy.<sup>16</sup> This interpretation matches the concept of the traditional Macedonian family as a group linked by mutual interests and care for its survival, through adopting specific cultural models appropriate to the given life conditions in a certain period of time. The changes in life could be followed from the beginning of the XXth century; they were suddenly opposed to the new ethics and moral norms that were included in the state regulation. In that sense, Joseph Obrembski, in the 30's of the XX century wrote about Poreche: "It could happen that someone kills his father. One person from the village of Bitovo has killed his father...His father started to date his son's wife....He came back from the army, and his wife told him..."<sup>17</sup>. One recent statement speaks about a young woman who saw that her mother and her father in law are doing "indecent things". "I went there, when I saw him touching her breasts. Even if she is my mother, I started hating her..."<sup>18</sup>.

Almost all collected data related to this topic speak in a negative sense about "snohachestvo" as a phenomena that happens to others, and as a rule is never related to the family of the informants. This attitude shows that it is a matter of a cultural category that belongs to the past, that the reasons for its existence are today forgotten. The informants either condemn or roughly rationalise this problem, as a result of the incapability to enter the essence of these complex social phenomena using contemporary dioptry.

---

14<sup>14</sup> Above mentioned information n. 3.

15<sup>15</sup> <http://www.stat.gov.mk/index.html>

16<sup>16</sup> Љиљана Гавриловић, Женски сениорат у браковима...н.д., 43,44

17<sup>17</sup> Јозеф Обрембски, Татко и син. Македонски етносоциолошки студии, кн.2, н.д., 278

18<sup>18</sup> Own investigations in the region of Kumanovo, 2001. Inf: Danica Bozinovska, born 1938 in the village of Bajlovce