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THE VILLAGES AS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES

Abstract: The ethnic region of Gorna Reka is situated in the North-west part of the Republic of Macedonia, covering the upper part of the river Radika, up to Boshkov bridge on the South. According to the basic characteristics of the terrain, the whole ethnographic space is a mountainous region. Figuratively speaking, the region of Gorna Reka, according to its natural setting, seems as an "ethnic tromp", it is isolated from the neighbouring regions with natural obstacles: mountains and rivers. The population, that has been structured through specific ethno-historical processes, today consists of Christian Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. The basic economic activities are cattle breeding and economic emigration, activities that influenced the development of the ethnic culture as a whole. Living in such a naturally isolated geographic settlement, without having a bigger urban centre near by, the population of Gorna Reka did not have a big possibility to communicate with the neighbouring regions. This is why they developed their own material, social and spiritual elements of culture. The way the village is organised as a community, that covers the rules of behaviour of its members, through nominating village employees of different kind, is a part of social life. Most of those characteristics are common for all South Slavs, but as well as for other Balkan populations.

Key words: Gorna reka, village council, village board, "kmet", "pitrop", "sejmeni", peace council, church council, collective ownership, self-assistance

The major part of the Macedonian population in the past was concentrated in the rural areas. The villages, as specific kinds of inhabited places, had their structure and function, that was dictated by the needs of the inhabitants, i.e. their way of life. The big attention given to the organisation of the villages speaks in favour of the above made statement - it was very important to know "what are the rules regulating the behaviour of the individuals, in accordance with the general rules applicable in the village community". The Turkish administration was not structured in a way to cover the whole territory of the empire. Thus, the organisation of the village life was an obligation given to the villagers, that is to their traditional forms of management (Aleksandar Stojanovski, 2001: 75-76, cyr.). On the other hand, this permitted the conservation of folk traditions (Jovan Ciic, 1991: 198) in a number of regions in Macedonia and at the Balkans. In such circumstances, the chosen village functionaries had the role of mediators between the Christian population and the Turkish authorities; the "kmets" would collect the taxes and would bring them to the Turkish authorities, who would not come to the villages very often.

In all villages of Gorna Reka, the village council was the highest form of social life - it was responsible for nominating and electing all persons that were important for the functioning of the village and fulfilling its needs, as well as for making decisions that had general implications for all villagers (History of the Macedonian nation, 1998: 412, cyr.). All heads of families, one from each family, were members of this council. Older people that were not heads of the family *zadruga* were often present at the village council (due to their age), and they were respected and dignified members of the wider village community. Their opinion was especially respected when the village council would decide upon a concrete problem, outside the regular obligations of the village council as a body. There were regular periods when it was organised, that is on the day of St. George (Gjurgjovden) and on St. Dimitrija (Mitrovden). Then all mature man would be present at the village meetings (History of the Macedonian nation, 1998: 413, cyr.). The regular periods for organising the village council have their own meaning. On this two holidays the major part of the village "part-time" workers would be chosen - the sepherd, the goat keeper, the one who would take care of the fields (*poljak*) and the one taking care of the forests (*shumar*). The village council would be announced by ringing the village church bell, while at the regular meetings people would gather even before the bell rang. It could happen, in a situation when a certain dispute between two villages would have to be settled, for example if someone's cattle would go into the meadow of another village, that a meeting would be organised and delegates from both villages would be invited. The participants in such a case would include the *kmet* with the members of the village council and a few more respected, elder villagers. They would meet on an open space between the two villages, and the decision on the punishment would be made mutually by the village *kmets*. The members of the village council (the heads of the *zadrugas*) would choose and nominate the head of the village - the *kmet*, who together with his assistants would form the village board, that was as well elected at a village council. The village board was the highest deliberative body that discussed general village problems, that were relevant for everyone in the village.

As it was more or less the case with all South-Slav people, as well as with the Macedonians, the kmets were respected people that managed the village community, taking care of it. Each village elected its own head that was a part of the village population. The head of the village or the head of the family had to be a respected person, primarily in the frames of his own family community. Since the head of the families in Gorna Reka was always the oldest member who was still able to work, the kmet would be elected from this group of people. It could happen that the head of the village would not be a head of a family zadruga, or that he would transfer the management of the family to his eldest son or that he could even split the zadruga so that he could work only for the benefit of his co-villagers and the village as a community. The authority of the kmet in this region was extremely important due to the historical circumstances in which people would live, as well as due to the continuous fight that had to be fought with the gangs that would enter, burn and rob the Gorna Reka villages. The verbal communication that these people had with the Turkish (Albanian) authorities ("agas" and "begs") was extremely important. Often it was them to save the villages and the villagers from being murdered, kidnaped, especially when it came to the children for whom the kidnapers would ask ransom¹, returning of stolen cattle etc. These were the focal obligations of the head of the village. The role of a mediator between the villagers and the authorities was very important, since such kind of problems happened all the time. The population was attacked on daily basis, the villages were robbed, thus the power and the authority that the kmet of Gorna Reka should have with the Turkish authorities had to be really big. Life of people would depend upon his authority and ability. The kmet would negotiate with the robbers' gangs, that is, their leaders: Ljoke and Osman were great robbers in this areas remember them. They knew that Tanash has money so the gang would come and rob him. Ljoke and Osman would come to us since my old man was the kmet"². Through the history of Gorna Reka in the period of the Turkish empire there were kmets that played a big role in the whole region of Gorna Reka. Such was the case of the "kmet Rade from the family of Bibaj, who was a kmet of all 16 villages"³. How important was the kmet could be seen from the information that speaks about a case that happened in the village of Vrbjani (Gorna Reka) when the whole village has changed its religion and folk costume. Since all villagers have changed their religion, that is have turned into Muslims, and not just one part of the population, as ordered by the kmet Rade Bibaj (a few members from each family), then "the kmet punished them, neither Dolna Reka nor Gorna Reka to exist. They should not wear our costume, but to wear another one. An us here, orthodox and Muslims, Macedonians and Albanians, we are speaking one language, and we are wearing one costume".⁴ This information proofs the already established method of Islamization of this village institution, as well as its survival among this population. The head of the village had other obligations. Among other things he decided, in accordance with the members of the village council, when should the cattle be taken to the fields, which part of the mountain will be used in the following year for cattle feeding, to whom it would be allowed to "buy" a village mountain for cattle feeding, where from could one cut trees for the winter and other needs of the villages, in one word he would "take care of the order in the village". The number of live stock that a villager could have "for free" to feed the stock on the village mountain would be strictly limited to 40 sheep or less sheep but more other types of cattle (cows and horses), however the number of the live stock should not exceed 40. Those households that had bigger herds of sheep and other cattle had to "buy" the mountain.⁵ In that sense the villagers had to pay a certain

1¹The most famous robber in the region of Gorna Reka who would not only robb but also kidnaped children and then asked for ransom firmo their parents, was a person called Sabrija from Trnica. During these events the kmets would play a key role, often united with each other, no matter from which village the kidnaped child came from, they would go together to the Turkish agas and begs to influence their decision to reliese the child and bring him back to the parents. Informant: Rafajlovski Kirko, village of Belica (own field research)

2² Informant: Josifovski Metodija, village of Krakornica (own field research)

3³ Informant: idem.

4⁴ Information heard from Avram Trpovski, that lived 100 years and is berried on the graves in the village church St. Archangel Mihail in the village of Krakornica. Informant, Josifovski Metodija, village of Krakornica (own field research)

5⁵ ...if you have more than 40 sheep you have to buy the mountain. Up to 40 you can feed them in the frames of the village, but for more you have to buy a meadow in the mountain...Informants Nackovski Atanas from Krakornica, Nestorovski Jelenko from Belichica, Sofronievski Jordan from Bogdevo, lives in Gostivar (own field research)

sum of money to the head of the village, that is, the board of the village that owned the mountain. Those shepherds used the Chaushica mountain (which was used in the past mostly by the "kjas" from Galichnik) and thus paid the villagers of Belichica⁶, while regarding the Bogdevska mountain they would pay to the appropriate kmet of Bogdevo, that is, its board. This payment was called by the population of Gorna Reka "pasharina". The sum of money that was collected was used for satisfying general village needs, construction and reconstruction of churches, schools, water drains, paying of ransom when the cattle was "kidnaped" by the gangs or paying the "kachaks" in a certain time frame so that they do not enter the village. The village money would be used for helping the poor ones, flour was bought for them, as well as for the widows who would get different products that were bought with this money. A part of this money was used for paying the "sejmens" that took care of the village and saved it from being robbed. Each village had 3-7 sejmens, Albanians from Albania, that were well paid for their job by the villagers. The rich emigrant families would pay the sejmens themselves. They got food in these houses, lived in the so called "sejmen rooms", and in some villages that were bigger separate houses would be built for them.

The village kmet was often in a situation to resolve conflicts that appeared between the villagers. He often passed his judgement in favour of one of the sides, however he judged fairly, since his authority in the village and in the wider region was based on this fairness. The conflicts related mostly to the bordering areas, material damages in the sense of cattle trespassing etc. Although the village kmet had a obligation to judge even in a case when problems appeared due to the division of a family community (zadruga), none of the informants knew about a concrete example if and in which family the village kmet had issued a final decision or assisted in a peaceful settlement of the case. It seems that the population of Gorna Reka has faced the more serious problems quite early, but they either do not remember or do not know if those problems were a responsibility of the kmet or not. However they remember about an important decision of the village kmet Vasil from the village of Bogdevo, when he did not approve a marriage between an Albanian girl and a Macedonian⁷, at the same time solving the problem in the most appropriate way.⁸ This information shows how important was that the kmet has an authority respected by everyone, not only in the frames of his own village but also in the wider region. If this was not so, it could happen that the kmet would not succeed in his intention to stop this marriage, so that even murders and "blood revenge" of the villagers could happen, members of two ethnic groups and two religions. Since this particular village kmet was known as a fair person, everything went smoothly, since in fact he helped Mustafica to marry her daughter, at the same time keeping her in the village, even in the same house.⁹ In Bogdevo the kmets that followed this one were Art-nije Arsic and Mele Malakoski.

The heads of the villages, in some isolated cases, together with the village board were passing a judgement even when it came to murders. In the same village the teacher was killed by his "servant", and the servant did not get convicted for that. Namely, the village teacher had a servant in his house, an Albanian, that helped him. The servant had worked in the house since he was a child. When he reached an age to get married, the teacher decided to bring him a wife, an Albanian too. However, the teacher has fallen for her himself, so he kept the relation with her hiding that fact behind the alleged marriage of his servant. In one occasion the servant got informed regarding the background of his marriage and the secret liaison of his wife with the teacher, so he killed him. The kmet thought that the servant had the right to kill the teacher and he released him of all responsibility.¹⁰

⁶ Today on the Belichka mountain there are shepherds from the village of Chajle. Although 1000 sheep could be fed, they are bringing 600. The population of Belichani is paid "honestly" a rent, according to an agreement. The payment is done in cash, or for each milking sheep 1 kg of cheese, or for each non-milking sheep 1/2 kg. Informant: Rafajlovski Kirko, village of Belichica (own field research)

⁷ It is a matter of the described case with Savo Aritonovski, around 1912, informant Sofronievski Jordan, Bogdevo village, lives in Gostivar (own field research)

⁸ Informant Sofronievski Jordan, Bogdevo village, lives in Gostivar (own field research). I got the same information on the importance of the person and the authority of the head of the village from all informants.

⁹ Informant: Avramovski Ranko, village of Vrben, lives in Gostivar (own field research)

¹⁰ According to most inhabitants of Gorna Reka, it is a matter of a period when a new village kmet was to be elected. One of the possible candidates was the village teacher. His opponent, through his own men, has given

Although in some ethnic regions Macedonia the kmet function was more a symbol of prestige and had a volunteer character, in Gorna Reka this was a paid job. The kmet has also a status of a local powerful person, but no one has ever turned rich attaining this money since the kmets even without it were rich people. In "Serbian times" (1935) the village kmet of Bogdevo was paid 14000 dinars.¹¹ As rich people the village kmets of many village churches in Gorna Reka were their patrons in financial sense ("kstitors"). Thus, the village kmets have build the churches in Belichica, Sense and today in Krakornica the church of St. Archangel Michail is being reconstructed by Tome Chiprovski who lives in America.¹²

Although up till now we have spoken about the village kmet as an institution, still all these decisions were taken together with the village board. The village board consisted of a few members of the same village. Their number depended on the size of each individual village, however it was 3-5-7 members since the villages of Gorna Reka are usually small and with small number of inhabitants. The village board gathered according to the need, that is "regularly", when there were pending problems that were of mutual concern of the village as a whole, or when some incidents happened that required a decision of the village board. This body was governed by the village kmet, but he could not decide upon his own wish without consulting the members of the board. The board consisted of elderly (45-65 years of age) and reasonable man so that it rarely happened that the members of the board had different opinion than the village kmet. They acted as one body that issued mutual decisions, that everyone was obliged to obey.

The village board took care of who should perform the duty of a forest keeper, field keeper, shepherd, goat keeper and church keeper (elected publicly at the village council), but it also took care about renting the mountain and how big the rent would be for the fields, defining the borders of the village and discussing conflicts related to the borders between the fields, deciding on assistance of poor, widowed and sick, renting "sejmens" (security guards for the village), reconstructing the church, the school, the road, building water taps and other general village needs. The village board gathered in the school or in the village church. At least once a month they gathered regularly, but if unexpected problems appeared they would gather even more often.

A forest keeper would be chosen from the villagers, and his duty would be to protect the forest that was considered a collective, village ownership. Although the villagers stress that they could very responsibly take care of the village forest themselves, in some villages of Gorna Reka a special person would be nominated to do this job. The forest was protected from uncontrolled cutting of the trees, not so much by the villagers themselves but the ones outside the village. The person who would be caught in the act would be fined and the cut trees would be taken away from him. If any one from the village had a need for wood, the village board would allow this person to cut, but only trees that were older, sick or with a bended trunk. This was especially related to the wood used for heating. When it came to the needed wood to be used as a construction material for a house or a certain economic premise, "marked" trees would be cut as well. In the village of Bogdevo there was a sawmill that worked on water, on Bogdeska river, where the wood would be processed.

In all villages of Gorna Reka a goat keeper would be hired. In the past, before the WWII, the goat keepers would always be from the villages of Gorna Reka, but today there are goat keepers from the villages of Gorni Polog, even from the village of Zajas, near Kichevo.¹³ His selection was done publicly, in front of all villagers and the village council, while the village board would do the selection. There was no written document on the obligations of the goat keeper and the village board, but the oral agreement was considered as something based on honesty. Its value was much bigger than the one that was written, since "a man's word and his cheek had the biggest value". The goat keeper would gather the village cows on a certain place or while he would move on the road to the meadows

the information to the servant and this resulted with the murder. The new village kmet did not convicted the servant, but has released him, after which the servant moved from □Bogdevo. Informant: Sofronievski Mile, village of Bogevo (own field research).

11¹¹ Informant: Dimitrievski Spiro, village of Brodec, lives in Skopje (own field research)

12¹² Tome Chiprovski is a grand-son of grandpa Chipre, from the family of Krosovci, that had 16000 sheep, but were also emigrants that had property in Istanbul

13¹³ Informant: Rafajlovski Kirko, village of Belichica (own field research)

each owner would join to the herd his own cows. The one who owned more cows or goats that had to be fed paid a bigger sum of money. The goat keeper would be paid at the end, after the job has been done. However, he also received food, that is, he got fed in the village. For one cow the family was obliged to provide him food for one day, for two cows - two days etc. Today the goat keeper from the village of Vrben, who comes from the village of Rechani, Gorna Polog, receives from the inhabitants of Vrben 300 DM per month. This sum is divided by the number of cows (50 or 70) and the final sum is paid by each individual villager, no matter how many cows does a family have. The difference is only the food for the goat keeper. The ones who have more cows give more food to him. The goat keeper from Vrben, since he is from another village, sleeps in one of the village houses, together with the hired shepherd.¹⁴

The field keeper was as well a person from Gorna Reka. Each village hired someone from the village itself to take care of the crops in the area of the village. In Gorna Reka, although there are no fields in the classical sense of the word, there are still oats, corn, potatoes, beans and pumpkin fields, and in the past (before the Mavrovo lake was built) vineyards that had to be kept secure from robberies as well as from entering of cattle. The field keeper was elected at the village council, in front of all villagers, and he was hired for a period of 4-5 months, most often from St. George to St. Peter's day (6.05-12.07), but sometimes until St. Ilija's day (02.08) when harvest starts at the higher places. The obligation of the field keeper was to take care of the village meadows and fields. If horse or other cattle would be found trespassing, then the field keeper would take the bell from the cattle's neck which served as a proof of the damage done, that is, the ownership of the cattle that was found on someone else's field was proved. The sanctions were financial. It could happen, in the post-war period, that people would go to court for such an offence.¹⁵ The field keeper got his salary from all villagers, in cash, after he had done his job. The last 15-20 years in the villages of Gorna Reka a field keeper is not hired any more, since the population is moving, so that a big part of the village agricultural surfaces are turned into meadows and forests.

The village shepherd was hired by the villagers of Gorna Reka, by individual families in cases when the number of sheep was less than 40. These families did not take the sheep to the "bachilo", but they took care of them at home. The village would hire a shepherd to take care of those sheep. He would take the sheep to the mountain that was a part of the village area where the sheep and the shepherd came from. Often, the hired shepherd was an inhabitant of the village himself. He would get hired at the village council, when an agreement on his payment was done. The villagers would buy him village shoes (opinci) and tobacco. As well as the goat keeper and the field keeper, he would be hired for a few months, from St. George to St. Dimitar (6.05-8.09), and he would be paid in cash and in food products. The families were obliged to provide one day nurture for the shepherd for each 5 sheep. If the owner had 30 sheep, the shepherd would eat at his place 6 days.¹⁶ Even today in the village of Vrben the same practice exists.

The church keeper (the "pitrop") would be selected in each village. He would take care of the church, as a sacral object that was very important for the Macedonian population of Gorna Reka. It was a custom that each inhabitant of Gorna Reka who would leave the village, who would emigrate, to leave the family icon in the village church. The pitrop would prepare the church every week, before a holiday, and when there would be funerals or commemorations. He would clean the church and the icons, prepared candles for the holiday. However he was responsible as well for the village graves, that is he was obliged to cut the grass around the graves. When there was a village celebration or a major Christian holiday, another villager helped the pitrop, for example the one who sold candles.¹⁷ If the pitrop was an elder person, which was often the case, then younger women would help him, es-

¹⁴¹⁴ The current goat keeper of Vrbeni has been for a few years the main one in this village. During the winter he goes home in Rechani and when spring comes he is asked to come back. He is 70 (in 1999). Informant: Jovanovski Jovan, village of Nistrovo, lives in Vrben (own field research)

¹⁵¹⁵ Informant Jovanovski Jovan, village of Nistrovo, lives in Vrben (own field research)

¹⁶¹⁶ The shepherd in Vrben, who is around 60 years of age, lives in Gostivar, but while he works as a shepherd in the village he sleeps in the same house as the goat keeper. Informant: Jovanovski Jovan, village of Nistrovo, lives in the village of Vrben (own field research)

¹⁷¹⁷ Informant: Sofronievski Jordan, village of Bogdevo (own field research)

pecially during village holidays, when the church and the yard had to be cleaned after the festivities were over. The villagers would pay a symbolic sum of money to the pitrop, once a year, usually at Christmas or Easter. The obligation of the pitrop was not time limited, that is, he would not be replaced until he could do the job. However he could retire himself from this voluntary work.

The "sejmens" are a specific feature of this region. They are a separate category of village employees. The population, living near Albania, where gangs came from, was forced to search for a solution. The only possible solution was to hire sejmens - Albanians who would take care of the village in terms of security for a certain sum of money. Each village had its sejmens. Their number differed, depending on the size of the illegal, between three and seven persons. The richer emigrant families had their own sejmens that protected the houses and the property of this family. The sejmens lived a nice life, they were always fed and dressed, and besides they got a big money reward for the job well done. In the smaller villages, where there were only one or two sejmens, they slept in a different house each night. The village where there were a number of sejmens would build a "sejmen tower", as the one in Krakornica, that had two rooms. There were famous sejmen's families in Albania, this profession was considered a family tradition. The village of Krakornica in 1943 was surrounded with kachak's gangs, around 150 persons, that robbed the other villages in the region. However, they did not succeed in entering this village. The population fought against them and in this fight the sejmen Amed from the family of Diertas (Albania) was killed. He was known as a good keeper of the village. Due to his killing, the villagers of Krakornica killed two kachaks, for revenge: "...and then we killed two, we took the blood revenge. After he died two of his brothers came (as sejmens). The sejmen would bring bread to the partisans during the liberation, they (the partisans) were hiding and he told everyone that they will win. He came here with 24 persons, then left for Konjare and two years after he moved to America. Ten years ago his son came here. He is a rich man there..."¹⁸ The village of Belichica had hired a sejmen from the Djika family in Albania. When the robberies became more often, one sejmen was not enough so other five were hired. The inhabitants of Belichica say that Ismail felt for a Macedonian girl from the village. Since the girl did not want to marry him, he decided to kidnap her. The villagers, understanding the seriousness of the situation, have taken the girl at relatives, until the issue calmed down (Stojan Karajanov, 1985). In Gorna Reka there were a few such events, when Albanians tried to marry Macedonian girls, but none of those cases was successful. Even cases when Albanian women wanted to marry a Macedonian did not succeed. One such case is recent: "...the wife of Mustafa had one girl, no sons. Her name was Dzavaarka. Her mother wanted to marry her for Savo Aritonovski"¹⁹, however the village kmet Vasil did not allow that. He, together with a few villagers from the board, has left the village of Rech and they brought from there Rustem Selmani, to be a son-in-law of Mustafica. This happened around 1912.²⁰ Although the major part of the sejmens gave an oath ("besa") and they really defended the village, in the last years there were cases when the sejmens forgot the given word and collaborated with the gangs"...All sejmens from other villages have betrayed the inhabitants, closed them in the churches and in meantime they robbed together with other Albanian robbers".²¹

A very important institution in the villages of Gorna Reka, that functioned from time to time, was a peace council consisting of three persons. It was especially important that these villagers should be older, over 65-70 years of age, and that they are famous for their fairness and honesty. Their authority had to be big, since they were responsible for solving all conflicts that appeared among the villagers. The inhabitants of Gorna Reka remember that in the past this council had to work all the time, since problems arouse especially when there were newcomers, and when new meadows and fields were turned into private property. Then the rationality of the members of the peace council have

18¹⁸ Informant: Metodija Josifovski, village of Krakornica (own field research)

19¹⁹ The family of Savo Aritonovski is one of the most famous in the village of Bogdevo. In the village there are a few water taps (the Priest's tap, Zare's tap, Ivan's tap, Milosh' tap), there is a Pejo's tap as well, which was built by someone called Apostol. Pejo was a famous shepherd who had 12000 sheep and was in Thessaloniki during the Young-Turks revolution. He had never returned from there. The family of Aritonovski is a descendant of the Pejo's family. Informant: Sofronievski Mile, village of Bogdevo, lives in Gostivar (own field research)

20²⁰ Informant: Sofronievski Mile, village of Bogdevo, lives in Gostivar (own field research)

21²¹ Informant: Metodija Josifovski, village of Krakornica (own field research)

stepped on the scene - they, through their decisions, helped finding compromise solutions and avoid even murders. The decision of the council were respected by the whole population.

In the villages of Gorna Reka there was also a church board, consisting of three or five villagers. One of them was elected president, and the others were members.²² Until the fifties the priest was a part of the church board, and he had a huge influence in the process of decision making. In the village of Belichica people remember that during the war there was a women member of the board, which was not customary.²³ All responsibilities for the church lied with this people who were selected each 4 years. The church had its own property - fields and meadows that were income generating. When the time for cutting the grass from the church meadows would come, then the church board would gather, usually on Sunday, so that the meadows whose grass was not cut would be put on auction. The one who would offer the biggest sum of money would get the meadow, that is he would cut the grass himself. The sums that were offered and accepted were not high, but the population did not bargain much as well since it was a matter of a church property.

A water keeper would not be chosen in the villages of Gorna Reka since there were enough water resources, sufficient to water the small number of gardens with potatoes, pumpkins, beans. The villagers would make an agreement on the schedule.

The village board was responsible for renting a part of the mountain for feeding the herds whose owners were persons from another village. There was a rule - one side of the mountain was always kept, and the herds would be fed only on the other. The next year the side that was not exploited last year was free for the herds to be fed.²⁴ This rational exploitation of the village mountain was indispensable, due to the recovering of the meadows. This rule functions even today and no one is breaking it. Some of the villages (for example Belichica) that do not have their own herds, rent the mountain to shepherds from other villages, and they get a certain sum of money in return, that was used for general village needs.

The collective ownership is a category known to all South-Slav people. Although they have called it differently (Cvetko Kostic, 1971)²⁵, its role and function was similar everywhere. The inhabitants of Gorna Reka have called it "selska-selsko" ("belonging to the village"). Everyone took care about this property, trying not to brake some of the established rules. Everyone had an obligation to take care of the mutual property, no matter if those were meadows or forests. The forests that were collective ownership had a big significance for the inhabitants of Gorna Reka (Vojislav Tanaskovic, 1992: 16)²⁶, the same way the meadows were important. For example, not everybody could cut trees. It was very important to select the wood used for heating.²⁷ Only in exceptional cases (for example when the wood was needed for construction of a house), cutting of a healthy and straight tree was allowed. In the past such types of ownership could be found more often, but today the however survived in the mountainous regions (Cvetko Kostic, 1971: 72). Gorna Reka, as an extremely mountainous region,

²²²² In the village of Belichica, after the war until the 70's of the 20th century, the members of the church board were nominated by the local community. Informant: Rafajlovski Kirko, village of Belichica (own field research)

²³²³ Informants: Nestorovski Jelenko, Rafajlovski Kirko, village of Belichica (own field research)

²⁴²⁴ Informant: Ignjatovski Slavko, village of Nichpur (own field research)

²⁵²⁵ ...in Serbia - "opshtinska zemlja" (the municipal land), in Croatia - "gmajna" and "imovina" of the municipality, in Slovenia - "vashka last", in Monte Negro - "plemenska, bratstvenichka zemlja" or "komunica", in Bosnia "mere" etc.

²⁶²⁶ A information that speaks about the importance of the forests is the one shich sais that two villages from Sredachka Zupa (Yugoslavia) have been fighting at court for 9 years (1903-1912) with the Turkish authorities regarding ownership of the forest that was bought by some "kjaja" from Tetovo

²⁷²⁷ ..we took care of this forest as if it was a park. We would carry hundrets of packs of trees from Melnik, Ribnica, Gorno Elovce, but we would not cut our woods...informants Josifovski Metodija, Nackovski Atanas, village of Krakornica (own field research)

has still kept the category of "selsko", as a type of collective ownership.²⁸ Although the ownership relations have changed, still each inhabitant of Gorna Reka has kept the same positive attitude towards "his" forest and meadows, keeping an eye on him and the others, how they behave towards the collective ownership.

The village board was responsible for the conflicts related to the definition of the collective and individual ownership of the land. The conflicts happened due to certain problems that arouse between the villages, but as well as due to conflicts on the lower level, between the villagers, who owned the land in the same village. Such disputes among the inhabitants of Gorna Reka were seldom, since there was land enough for everyone. The land that is a collective ownership, the village property, most often forests and meadows, is called by the inhabitants of Gorna Reka "sinor". As in many mountainous regions in Macedonia (Branislav Rusic, 1956: 1), the border between two or three village sinors is most often a natural one and it follows the edge of the mountain, the flow of the rivers and the smaller water flows, or the bottom of the valleys. The villages that are situated on the mountain of Korab have a bigger sinor than the villages that are situated on the mountain of Bistra. The villages that are situated on the mountain Korab have a bigger sinor than the ones on mountain Bistra. Those are Vrbjani (31,5 km²) and Vrben (25,6km²), while the village of Belichica has the biggest sinor compared to other villages on Bistra mountain (25km²) (Mitko Panov, 1998: 61-62). The village territory in the border region between two-three villages do not have any artificial notifications having in mind the fixed, non-changeable natural borders. On certain places, most often when it comes to the meadows, there are stone markings that define the ownership of the meadow of one of the villages. Almost each and every inhabitant of Gorna Reka knows exactly where is the border between two village sinors and it happened really seldom that someone would trespass on the territory of another sinor. In the past, "in Turkish times", when some of the kin groups of Gorna Reka have settled, there were disputes related to the definition of the village territories. In such cases the rule of the more numerous and the more powerful was valid.²⁹ Later, after it settled, the population has chosen its own representatives, that were responsible for resolving such conflict situations. Even then the right of the more powerful ruled. The village that had more militant families has always succeeded to get more meadows in its sinor. When new territories were conquered, murders happened all the time, so that at certain places, especially in the sinors of the Korab villages there are graves "vorza" that are thought to be "Latin", from the time when the inhabitants of Gorna Reka have settled.³⁰ As a result of the conquest of the village sinors, although in the majority of the villages in Macedonia the bordering sinor is "around the middle of the distance between their last houses" (Branislav Rusic, 1956:1), still this is not valid for all villages of Gorna Reka. The village of Bibaj that is located under Korab has the smallest sinor (3,8km²)³¹, since it was formed as a part ("maalo") of the Nistrovo village, after the kin group with the same name has settled here. The village of Kichinica has the smallest sinor compared to other villages on Bistra mountain (4,4km²) (Mitko Panov, 1998: 149-150).

Although in the villages of Gorna Reka the self-assistance as a category was not present very much, still a couple of types of mutual self-assistance were known. A major part of the population, after finishing a part of its field work, has hired workers that were paid, while the regular work around the cattle in the houses that were richer was done by hired man "izmekars". Assistance was used mainly during harvest of oats and rye. The harvest period was short (July-August) and all work had to be done in a certain time frame. Thus, the owner of the field that was harvested was obliged to provide food for the

²⁸ The population has certain problems when it comes to ownership, since the region of Gorna Reka is completely falling under the territory of the Mavrovo National Park, which implicates rules related to collective ownership, which according to the law vanishes, that is, is being transformed into state ownership

²⁹ Informant: Josifovski Metodija and Nackovski Atanas, village of Krakornica (own field research)

³⁰ According to the information, the "Latin" graves in the village of Bogdevo were surrounded with a fence until 1945, but since the war the fence has been damaged and no one took care of it. In the same village, at the place of the current church St. Dimitrija, built in 1910, there was a "Roman church". Informant: Sofronievski Jordan, village of Brodec. Latin catholic graves were noticed in the village of Nistrovo, informant Jovanovski Jovan, village of Vrben (own field research)

³¹ At the same time this is a village with the smallest territory in Gorna Reka. The villagers from the surrounding villages say that "...Bibaj is a settlement of Nistrovi, there are three fire-places (families) and 33 children", informant: Jovanovski Jovan, village of Vrben (own field research)

harvesters (a cabbage-pie, cheese-pie etc.) three times a day, every day until his field is harvested. Every harvester had to bring her own sickle. The harvesters would make turns until the wheat was harvested, often sleeping on the fields, since they lived in the mountains above the villages. Many of the harvesters stayed here for days, bringing along their children. Such mutual self-assistance was called going to "spomog".

The inhabitants of Gorna Reka knew as well about the "sprega", a kind of mutual self-assistance. They gathered when the fields had to be ploughed, with two ox in something that was called a "volovska sprega". The major part of the population had only one ox, which was not enough, so that the only possibility to get a couple of them at the same time was to merge them into a "sprega". In the years which were quite successful, a horse would be borrowed to process the oat, when in the "stozer" (the device which was used for this purpose) two horses were used. The rye would be processed manually, with the help of a wooden tool that would be placed diagonally - the rye would be put on it and beaten with a stick. In this way the piles would remain the same and they would be used for covering the houses and the additional buildings. The ones who would borrow an ox or a horse for "sprega" were obliged to feed the animal while it was with them, but at the same time not to overload it. The "sprega" was an obligation that had to be returned, that is, the one who borrowed the ox would have to return the favour when the owner of the ox would be in need.

The self-assistance was especially important in a situation when the poor or the widowed needed help from man: when a house or other buildings were built. Then the male part of the villages would gather on "angarija"³² to help during the construction. In this case, if the hostess would not be in a position to provide lunch for the workers then everyone would bring his own food. The widows, especially the ones that had small children, would be provided by the villagers with woods from the forest, "everyone according to his own capacity".³³

A regular form of self-assistance was practised when a gravestone for a diseased villager would be made. Then 4 ox were used to get the gravestone to the graves. No one would refuse to provide this kind of help, since the refusal was considered as a major sin. The one who borrowed the ox would participate in the carrying and placing the gravestone. Still, most often this was based upon relative's or friendship relations.

The current situation in the region is drastically different when compared to the situation described above. The complete area of Gorna Reka has been depopulated, so that the total number of inhabitants in the whole region is 1385 persons living in the villages of Vrbajni - 611 inhabitants, Vrben - 180, Nistrovo - 153 (according to the census 1994). Some villages have no inhabitants at all (Kichinica, Nivishte) and in some of them there is a dozen of persons living there from May-October. In such a situation, it is logically that the general rural traditions of the population disappear, and together with it most of the functions that the village had in the sense of its social and economic organisation.

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3232 "Angarija" was practiced when a villager needed a bigger working force for a day or two, but this "angarija" had to be returned as a favor when there would be a need for it. Informants: Lichovski Alekso, village of Kichinica and Nestorovski Jelenko, village of Belichica (own field research)

3333 In Gorna Reka the male persons who would not go abroad to make money were called "housers" (domashari). They would usually cut wood and sell it by packs. Most of the wood was transported from the forest of Vrben, from Prten, on the border between Trnica, Belichica and Kichinica. Usually they would go two times a day, and they would bring three-four packs of wood. They would also bring wood for the widows. Informants: Avramovska Bosilka, village of Vrben, Rafajlovska Verica, village of Belichica (own field research)

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