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STRUGGLES TO OVERCOME ETHNOCENTRISM OF ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENTS

Abstract: The turbulent political developments in Macedonia in recent years have legitimised the paradox of the ethnocentric ethnologist or anthropologist, especially during the period of the right-wing government. This phenomenon has its own history, considering the existence of the concept of national scientific disciplines, whose aim is to cherish, strengthen and often (re)create national identity. This is usually the impression of the public about the tasks of these disciplines.

The text examines the stereotypical positions of the students at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, which persist despite the efforts of the teaching staff to deconstruct and problematise them from a methodological aspect. In order to illustrate this paradox, I will use the papers written by ethnology and anthropology students which contain ethnocentric, patriotic, even nationalistic positions. Although the curriculum of the Institute does not support such positions concerning what kind of researchers they should be in regard to their national identity, it becomes obvious that the struggle with the widely spread positions can be very difficult.

Keywords: ethnocentrism, ethnology and anthropology studies, students, stereotypes, national identity.

Introduction

The broader Macedonian public sees a logical connection between ethnology and ethnocentrism, and this concept has a long tradition. The public discourse, especially in the recent, politically turbulent years, has additionally marked ethnology as one of the disciplines that guard the Macedonian national identity through research in areas that are closely related to the national: the past, tradition, customs, folk culture, etc. National scientific disciplines whose professional task is to defend, guard and strengthen

identity, presenting “evidence” contrary to those that deny the identity were required, as if the Macedonian national identity has historically been under continuous threat. The anthropologising of ethnology from the beginning of the millennium began defying the aforementioned tasks of the national ethnology, attempting to treat the processes of (re)creation, guarding, care for, defense of, and strengthening the national identity as interesting research topics rather than a professional call of the scientists. This change of concepts in regard to exploring “our own”, especially in areas closely related to the national identity to which the researcher belongs, is obviously very difficult and slow. In recent years, the students who hold on tightly to the concept of ethnology as a national science are a great majority at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, while the students who accept relativisation of the national concept are a significant minority. The reasons for this situation will be examined through the history of ethnology in Macedonia, the anthropologising of the discipline, and through the contemporary rightist interventions¹ of the government that was in power until recently, which have contributed to the perseverance of the national concept in these disciplines, illustrated with examples from the work of the students at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (IEA) at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University - Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia.

National Ethnology in the Republic of North Macedonia - main characteristics

The beginnings of the Macedonian national ethnology can be followed more clearly since the socialist period. According to Risteski, in the Macedonian context, under the influence of the strong control of the socialist system, especially in the early years, there were strong efforts to marginalise this national discipline in Macedonia, due to its determination to deal with ethno-genesis and folk culture, in order to obstruct potential dangers “of promoting certain ‘traditional values’ that had to be replaced by new ones at any cost” (Risteski 2014: 74). Folklore Studies, considered to be less dangerous in this sense and to have smaller influence, were established in that period through the founding of the Institute of Folklore in 1950, while ethnology was treated in such a way that made it clear that “the official Macedonian politics in the period of early socialism clearly distanced itself from raising any issues of national interest for the Republic of Macedonia” (Risteski 2014: 72). The main ideological marks from the Yugoslav period, such as brotherhood and unity, equality, etc., do not support national and nationalistic traits in the work of researchers from these areas. Nevertheless, according to the research and texts of folklore experts, ethnologists and ethno-musicologists in the *Македонски фолклор* (Macedonian Folklore) journal, published by the Institute of Folklore in this period, we can see that, contrary to expectation, the Yugoslav period was marked by national concerns. According to Herder’s epistemological postulate from the nineteenth century, the nation is an organic entity, the *Nationalgeist* is the foundation of its originality, and it has existed throughout history as unique, unchanged and authentic;

1 The right-wing conservative party VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) led the government of the Republic of Macedonia in the period 2006-2016.

thus, the folklore, or the various aspects of the folk culture, sustain national identity throughout time and determine its uniqueness. That is where the fascination and the obsession with the village culture come from (see Vukov 2012: 335). This obsession with the national often means ethnocentrism, even evident in the nationalistic discourse among the researchers from the national disciplines. In the Macedonian context, during the Yugoslav period, there was a strong consensus among national researchers regarding their main task: determining the national affiliation of the folk culture. There is almost no deviance from this concept. In this preoccupation with the national, the idea of the Macedonian people as “our people” is the significant and inseparable component of the scientific discipline, which emphasises the concern of the discipline for “its own” people. The Romanticist aspects are highly present in this period, and they suggest glorification of the folk culture in favor of the Macedonian national identity. The folk culture, and tradition on which it is based, are treated as static and unchangeable throughout the centuries to the advantage of the continuation of the ethnic existence. The authors are assiduously in search of unifying characteristics, common for all the people, in the themes they research and their specific traits mostly depend on the prefix “ethno”. The idealisation of the folk culture obviously represents a task of the national science that always interprets the Macedonian folk culture in positive light, without exceptions or deviations. The foreign influences, those of the other (neighbouring) cultures are welcome in the analyses only when they serve as an example of the deviation from the idealized, imaginary Macedonian ideal/concept/identity (need a noun here). In all other cases, the mission is to underline the original, authentic, pure Macedonian folk culture. The national science is strongly dedicated to the obligation to protest against the appropriations of the Macedonian folk culture by neighbouring national sciences. Therefore, the authors emphasise the authentic character of Macedonian folklore and folk culture, which are geographically and ethnically limited, created on “Macedonian soil” and with common Macedonian characteristics. The folklore and the folk culture thus become ownership of the separate Balkan nations that are necessarily very different from each other. All mentioned characteristics of the national science in the Yugoslav period suggest that the authors were advocating “their own people” in ethnocentric style rather than undertaking “objective” scientific research in the positivist sense, although most authors declared that they chose the “objective” approach.

While this mission of the national disciplines in the Yugoslav period can be “justified” with the needs of the young Macedonian nation and its consolidation, we encounter similar discourse in the period after the independence in 1991, when the first issues of the *Этнолог* (Ethnologist) journal were published by the Macedonian Ethnological Society. Again, due to certain political and historical circumstances, Macedonian ethnology firmly puts itself in the function of the Macedonian “ethnos” in this second phase of consolidating the Macedonian nation. In the introduction alone to the first issue of the journal, the term “ethno” appears in so many contexts that it makes clear the tendency to research various themes exclusively through the lens of the ethnical: ethno space, ethnic history, ethnic treasure, ethnic life, ethnic territory, even ethnic scientific thinking. In short, the mission of the journal is: “Undoubtedly, the *Этнолог* journal will provide space for articles from national ethnology, the ethnology of the Macedonian people, their ethnical history which has unfortunately been

appropriated, even denied, and in the last decades and recently, even its ethnic territory is being taken. Only through the ethnological research, published in the *Ethnologist* journal, will the truth of the ethnology of the Macedonian people be conveyed to the world public" (*Ethnologist* No. 1 1992: 7, 8). This tone is typical of the periods of intensive revitalisation of the ethnocentric view of the national disciplines – with the creation of the Macedonian nation within SFRY (long form of the acronym), after the disintegration of SFRY in the independent Republic of Macedonia from 1991, and especially under the leadership of the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE government from 2006 to 2016.

The main characteristics of the Macedonian national ethnology (as well as the other related national disciplines) are certainly shared in the Balkan and the broader Central and Eastern European context, and are different from and completely contrary to "western anthropology". These characteristics, according to the identification of the Western anthropologists, mark a "discipline dealing with own folk (peasant) culture, a positivist and atheoretical discipline, influenced by nation-building and communist ideology. In sum, it was an outdated discipline that had little to offer to social anthropology" (Čapo [Latin letters for consistency] 2014: 56). Additionally, these characteristics are also marked by the terms "peripheral", "non-Western" anthropologists or anthropologists "from the third world" (Bošković [Latin letters for consistency], Eriksen 2010: 3), as well as by the implicit and explicit tones of underestimation in the analyses of the "non-Western" anthropologies, that is, ethnologies which are often identified as backward, retrograde, positivist, small, national/nationalistic, all that the "Western", true, developed anthropology supposedly is not (Čapo [Latin letters for consistency] 2014: 52). It is therefore important to emphasise that there is not one single path in the development of ethnologies in Central and Eastern Europe, and they cope with the challenges differently. Even within Yugoslavia, centres such as Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana relatively early on started exiting the frame because of the openness towards the Western theories as early as the 1970s and 1980s, discussing themes not typical of the ethnology at the time: everyday life, urban ethnology, new critical approaches towards ethnicity, as well as questioning the Romanticist analyses of the classical ethnological themes, etc. (see, for example, Čapo [Latin letters for consistency] 2014, Nedeljković 2012, Bošković 2007). The inferiorisation of the Central and Eastern European ethnologies deserved the criticism of many authors from these areas who opposed stereotypical identification because, after all, "there is no such thing as 'peripheral anthropology', this clause dangles / unclear how it connects logically and gramatically. Yet, when we speak about the Macedonian national ethnology, it remains peripheral in every sense of the word in comparison to the centres in the Yugoslav period, as well as after the disintegration of SFRY, considering its specific history. It can be stated that ethnology and anthropology are still in the phase of establishing a reputation in the Macedonian context.

Ethnology and Anthropology Studies

In 1946/47, in the newly founded Faculty of Philosophy, the Seminar for Ethnography and Ethnology in Skopje was opened, headed by professor Branislav Rusić. Until the Seminar was closed in 1952/53, 36 students graduated under his mentorship

(Risteski 1997: 44). The educational vacuum lasted until 1984 when the two-year-long ethnology study was opened at the Institute of Geography within the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. This study had one practical reason: to re-qualify the surplus of geographers in accordance with the state program to reduce unemployment. In 1988, thanks to the efforts of several ethnologists, a four-year-long study opened at the Department of Ethnology, again at the Institute of Geography as a logical continuation of the tradition of anthropological-geographical research promoted by Jovan Cvijić, which remained imprinted for a long time in the Macedonian context. Thus, the small number of ethnologists in Macedonia remained stuck, that is, “favored the old way of ‘a little of everything’”: a little geography, a little ethnography and a little history (Svetieva 2005: 226). Considering the lack of teaching staff, a large number of ethnological courses were taught by geographers, and accordingly, the study program of this Department contained a larger number of geographical courses than courses related to ethnology. The concept of ethnological courses meant a division into ethno-genesis, material, social and spiritual culture of the ethnic communities, with a special accent on the Macedonians. Until the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the characteristics of the aforementioned national disciplines can be encountered in the educational process, all the way to the moment when the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology was founded as an independent institution in 2005, when the more serious attempts to anthropologise ethnology began². This institute is the only higher education institution for undergraduate studies in this area and corresponds to the suggestion of Chris Hann for merging the traditional national ethnology (folklore and material culture) with the “Western” anthropology (Hann 2007). It is a small institute with about ten employees, of whom seven are directly involved in the education process. What is important is that at least among the teaching staff there is a consensus regarding the treatment of ethnicity through relativising and deconstructing the Romanticist, primordial approach that essentialises the identities, and often enables national or nationalistic agendas that can be dangerous if advocated by the academic world. Considering the fact that we live in a politically turbulent time, the dangers from the national and the nationalistic discourse can be illustrated through everyday situations that we witness in the nationally and nationalistically burdened society, so that the students have the opportunity to more easily analyse and understand the misuse of the ethnic and national issues by different power centres. Instead of the different nationalist essentialisms supported by the political centres, the focus in our studies is placed on constructing identities and subjective dimensions of the ethnic and national identity (Nedeljković 2012: 276, 278). In this context, the curricula were often changed in order to follow the trends set by the centres with a longer tradition in neighbouring countries and in the world. The study program that finally connects ethnology and anthropology was accredited in 2008. Positive changes in this context are registered in the postgraduate and doctoral studies at the Institute (see Risteski 2017). In the context of the issue of national and nationalistic disciplines, continuous efforts are being made, with the undergraduate accreditations from 2012 and the latest from 2017, to moderate and oppose the national concept. Apart

2 The institute was again situated at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, which is certainly a curiosity, taking into consideration this original and not standard solution, which is a consequence of the specific history of the ethnology studies in the Republic of North Macedonia.

from the courses that directly deal with ethnicity, such as the course “Anthropology of Ethnicity”, this issue is tackled in many other courses, whose syllabi are directly and deliberately distanced from the publically accepted national marks concerning these disciplines. According to the curricula, the ethnocentrism in regard to the ethnic and national identity is seriously questioned.

The debate on Hann’s proposal emphasizes the difficulties in merging national ethnology and anthropology. Benovska says that “the overwhelming majority of scholars have been brought up in the traditions of ethnocentric *ethnography*, *folklore studies*, or *ethnology*, and their wish, alone, for reorientation (when it is there) is not always sufficient” (Benovska 2007: 14). Verdery considers Hann’s plan naive because of the difficulties to merge two completely different, even opposing, traditions with different origin, different philosophies and epistemologies (Verdery 2007: 49).

In the case with the majority of students in ethnology and anthropology at IEA, the struggle to anthropologise their ethnocentric positions becomes exceptionally difficult in the new social circumstances. The long national and nationalistic education supported by the right-wing government made that struggle more difficult than before. This especially refers to the interventions in the textbooks for primary and secondary education for the courses in the areas of social sciences and humanities, such as history, social science etc. that were loaded with this kind of rhetoric. Another thing that should be mentioned is the absence of curricula and courses in the lower levels of education in the area of ethnology and even more anthropology that could potentially diminish the ethnocentric rhetoric in the educational materials. In the context of the education of the future ethnologists and anthropologists, it is obvious that the opportunities of several instructors from IEA to make more substantial changes are rather limited unless more systematic interventions begin in regard to these issues on all levels of education. It can be concluded that in Macedonia today, among the researchers working in the area of ethnology and anthropology, the classical ethnological positions about guarding the national identity (noun needed here) are far louder than those which attempt to relativise the primordial and essentialist treatment of identity in an ethnical and national sense³.

Illustrations of the persistent national concept

Epistemologically, ethnology, as it developed in its earlier phase, was condemned to something I describe as ethnographic alienation: the more a scholar is trying to define the essence of the people he or she is trying to describe as original, indeed of any

³ At the occasion of the change of the name of the Republic of Macedonia according to the Prespa Agreement with the Republic of Greece, this difference in regard to the treatment of the national identity by the national ethnologists and anthropologists became very illustrative. The national scientists with aggressive alarms warned of the loss of the national identity feeling a strong call from the motherland to defend it, while for the anthropologists, the identity is created and recreated, and it is not unusual to change it. Therefore the anthropological positions in regard to the national identity in this case were identified by the national scientists as treason, and eventually as completely illogical for scientists that deal with these identities.

group of people as a unique phenomenon, the more likely it comes out that no essential characteristic recorded may be attributed exclusively to any single bounded group of people. Whatever cultural trait a researcher of traditions extracts from ethnographic observation, it always comes out that the same phenomenon is observable in another group. Comparative ethnological studies show that there is no essential ancient characteristic of any people (Muršič 2017: 58).

The quote by Muršič summarizes, in simplest terms, the intentions of the teaching staff at IEA in regard to the education of future ethnologists and anthropologists in the Republic of North Macedonia, namely that it should be more focused on the humanist dimension of the disciplines than on ethnocentricity. Yet, the quotes⁴ from their articles make it clear that unfortunately ethnocentrism, according to the national concept of disciplines, continues to rule almost unchanged from the time of the founding of these disciplines in Macedonian context.

For some of the students, it seems that “the great love towards the homeland and the fellow Macedonian people” is a primary motive for applying to this faculty. To illustrate, when a female student taking the course “History of Ethnology in Macedonia” was asked to talk about Anton Stoilov and his techniques of field research at the beginning of the 20th century, instead of giving an answer, she quoted a saying: “The person who has a better friend than his own fatherland is a scoundrel” – the reason for this being that Anton Pop Stoilov identified himself as Bulgarian, and was born in Gornodjumajsko in 1869. Thus, his methods and techniques of work do not deserve attention because he identified himself, in an ethnic sense differently from her expectations.

The link of the potential ethnologists and anthropologists with their own people remains equally strong as in the time of socialism when the national disciplines were established. Students’ texts identify the situations when the ethnic background of the researcher is the same as the ethnic background of the “nation” that is being researched – not in the sense of contemplating about the possible influence the researcher’s background may have on his/her research, but in the sense of logical, almost natural fascination with the Macedonian folk culture. In this sense, “the research at home” for the national ethnologists directly entails the dangerous methodological position of idealising what is theirs. The folk tradition and culture which is also fascinating for the contemporary national ethnologists is treated in the same way: its elements exist throughout the centuries, they have their continuity and are autochthonous expressions of the Macedonian folk genius. These romanticized tones are often supported by the repetitive, historical and pathetic interpretations for the centuries-long suffering of the Macedonians, which has brought about extraordinary qualities: “The Macedonian oro⁵ has persisted for a long time, persisted in the culture of the Macedonians although it has passed through very difficult centuries of subjugation, assimilation, oppression by the Ottomans. All of the pain, yearning for freedom, faith in God and Christianity have found

4 The titles of the texts and the initials of the authors will be used in order to avoid possible labeling of individuals because the intention is to show the problem with the pervasiveness of this tendency rather than to point out “culprits” among the students.

5 Folk dance.

their way into the folk tradition of the Macedonians. As a result, the Macedonian oro is recognized for its autochthonous messages and stylistic characteristics that legitimise this type of creative spirit of the folk genius” (B.T. 2015: 14). The tangible, material expressions of the folk culture still express more faithfully the ethnic and national identity, and therefore the focus is placed on these “objective” markers of identity much more than on its subjective aspects: “In its abundant treasure of spiritual and material culture created during the centuries, the Macedonian people have created such a richness of folk costumes with invaluable timeless values. The imagination of the folk genius went so far that, when it comes to the folk costumes, it is stated that they are not just a general national and regional mark, but that each village had its own mark expressed with the colorful patterns, with the embroidery and with the colors of the material” (B.T. 2015: 33). Due to this intimate relation to the theme and the “subject” of the research, and linked to the obligation to support one’s own in an activist way, presenting and affirming the national specificity of the Macedonians is considered to be the duty of the contemporary national ethnologists: “So that we do not forget who we are, where we come from, what is our treasure, and in order for the others to get to know us, Tanec has been cherishing and successfully presenting the cultural identity of the Macedonians for 65 years with its work (...) In this way, I believe that I have managed to – at least nearly – achieve the idea of presenting the ethnographic aspects in the work of the ensemble Tanec, which I consider very important and inevitable in the overall identification of the Macedonian people, as well as in the identification of the Macedonian people by others” (B.T. 2015: 36, 42)⁶.

In the selected citations from an MA thesis, we can see the thin line between the national and the nationalistic. The village, as a long preoccupation of the national ethnologists, is treated, still in the style of Romanticism, as the core of the folk spirit which is then transformed into the ethnic and the national: “Each region, and even each village represented variants of the recognisable Macedonian ethnic culture. The key to Macedonian survival in the most critical historical periods, marked by divisions of Macedonia, by the spiritual and physical extermination of the Macedonians, is located in that mass of rural population” (O.C. 2017: 32). Such views open the path for “normalisation” of nationalism in the MA thesis that deals with exploring ideas about the unification of Macedonia in a village in the vicinity of Skopje: “The need for affirmation of the identity partly comes from the historical heritage of discrepancy between the borders of the national and the ethnic Macedonian identity, as well as from the fact that the identity is not recognised by the neighbouring countries. This is where the appearance of certain forms of nationalism stems from, not in the sense of appearance of nationalism as an aspiration for accepting one’s nation as superior in comparison to the others, but nationalism in the sense of protection, safeguarding and the confirmation of one’s national identity” (O.C. 2017: 130)⁷.

The research themes in the aforementioned examples could offer truly interesting results if there was potential for accepting the idea that the support of “one’s own”,

6 B. T. graduation paper: Ethnography of the oro-dance practice presented through the history of the oro interpretation in the ensemble “Tanec”, Skopje, IEA 2015.

7 O. S. MA thesis: Ethnological and anthropological research of the reflection of the idea for unification of Macedonia in Gorno Lisiche-Skopje area, Skopje, IEA 2017.

especially when the ethnic or national identity as a characteristic of the national ethnologies is concerned, has become unsustainable long ago as a research position. Instead of deconstructing and critically analysing, the student researchers have actually supported the ideas that are the topic of their research, giving them legitimacy through the educational and scientific institution that hosts such research. Therefore, these positions, regardless of the fact that they are radically different from the educational guidelines of the IEA instructors, impose a great collective responsibility on the institution.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the fact that, besides ethnology and anthropology, there are also other scientific disciplines and areas that are greatly concerned with the national, it is necessary to put such debates and re-examination of the methodological approaches of the disciplines towards national issues into the focus of the Macedonian academic and broader social interest.

The right-wing government in the Republic of Macedonia, led by the conservative and nationalistic party, VMRO-DPMNE, on the one hand insisted on following the contemporary trends in regard to the curricula of the educational institutions in order to improve the quality and modernise higher education⁸, and on the other hand, it participated very actively in the process of (re)creation, strengthening and glorification of the Macedonian national identity. The political and ideological interventions were realized through the projects related to the “antiquisation”, Skopje 2014, the production of many documentaries with historical content, and their daily broadcast in the media, but also through corresponding interventions in the educational system, mainly through the production of textbooks with similar rhetoric⁹. This tendency survived for about ten years, so that it seriously contributed to the revival and strengthening of the concept for a national discipline whose main task is to greatly idealise the Macedonian national identity, that is, to work in its favour. The long obsession with the Macedonian national identity

8 The VMRO-DPMNE government proposed amendments in the Law on Higher Education in 2015 and, among other things, according to Article 94 for the first cycle of academic studies, at least 80% of the study programme should coincide with the contents and objectives of the same or similar study programme that is taught at a university which is among the first 50 on the list of the Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University in People's Republic of China, except for the elective courses. The amendments to the Law on Higher Education caused massive protests, so they were not adopted.

9 According to some media research, the Government of VMRO-DPMNE from 2013 to 2015 supported the production on MTV (the public service of the Macedonian television) of about 70 documentaries with historical content for which it spent 1.8 million euros in order to present the glorious past of the Macedonians (Tamara Chausidis and Vlado Apostolov, MTV financed a film version of “Skopje 2014”, the series of historical television documentaries was supposed to achieve what “Skopje 2014” aimed to achieve with facades, building and monuments), published on 14 December 2017, accessible on: <https://prizma.mk/mrt-finansirala-filmska-verzija-na-skopje-2014/>, last accessed in December 2018.

makes the incontestable ethnocentricity of the ethnology and anthropology students understandable, considering the fact that they were exposed to such circumstances in their primary and secondary education, This obsession with the national is additionally normalised in many other segments of their daily life – for example, watching television or walking through the center of Skopje.

Taking into consideration the decrease of interest for the humanities as a problem on the global level, year after year an ever smaller number of students enroll in ethnology and anthropology studies in the Republic of North Macedonia. Considering the problems in the lower levels of education in the past years, the capacities of the enrolled students for critical thinking are rather basic. The lack of attractiveness of the studies, the small number of students, and the transformation into the European credit transfer system proved inefficient in higher education and in fact contributed to the decrease of its quality. The government campaigns for the importance of gaining higher education contributed to stimulating an enormous percentage of young people to pursue higher education. The project for dispersed studies in a lot of cities throughout the country and the commercialisation of higher education significantly reduced the criteria expected from institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia. As a result of all these factors in the previous years, the problem with the potential and capacities of the students has become alarming. In such circumstances, the significant objectives of ethnology and anthropology in Macedonia – to encourage critical thinking, to create capacities for recognition and deconstruction of stereotypes, especially when it comes to the ethnic and national identity in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment – are difficult to achieve, especially considering the fact that a large percentage of those who graduate, defend their MA or PhD theses linked with the “Macedonian” in one way or another, still practice the national concept when these disciplines are concerned.

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