

Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska (Poland)

MY ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA¹

Abstract: The paper is divided into two parts. In the first one, an author analyses her changing position in the field, highlighting a gender and marital status. Positionality not only gives various access to interlocutors but also defines or even determines her subjects of research. In the second part of a text, a discourse on Torbeshi / Macedonian Muslims is analysed. An author observes, this group is exposed to strong propaganda from Turkish, Albanian and Macedonian perspectives. She argues, this propaganda is also grown by Macedonian scholars for whom Torbeshi are Macedonians who converted into Islam during Ottoman Empire, while there are very few research on their own changing and fluid identification.

Key words: positionality, gender, fieldwork, Torbeshi, discourse.

Having done fieldwork in Republic of Macedonia for ten years, I face with different methodological (especially ethical) problems during the fieldwork as well as with ethnographic issues researched by Macedonian scholars. This both questions I would like to describe and discuss in this paper.

As a student I carried out fieldwork in central and Eastern Macedonia (2000-2004), while from 2006 I have conducted research in western part of the country. I do not belong to any research team in Macedonia, nor am I financed by any Macedonian institution; I work as completely independent researcher, although I have regular contact with Macedonian scholars and use their publications. During the fieldwork I use Macedonian language, even while interviewing Albanians or Turks (I have very basic knowledge of Albanian). My latest subject regards labour migration of Macedonian Muslims (Torbeshi) to Italy. Probably my theoretical and methodological conclusions are nor unique for Macedonia, I do not however personal experience from the other places. Therefore the following statements are very subjective and personal.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first one I will try to analyse my position as a foreigner and woman in the field while in the second, an academic discourse on ethnicity and national affiliation of Macedonian Muslims (Torbeshi) – a group whose mother tongue is Macedonian, while a confession – Islam.

¹ My deep thanks go to an anonymous reviewer who pointed me several, very important issues related to Macedonian scholarship.

I. Status of an anthropologist in the field – three cases

At the beginning of a methodological reflexion it is worth to note that doing fieldwork in the Republic of Macedonia, alike in the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria as well as in Eastern Europe, including my native Poland, consists of short visits in the place of research. It makes observing of everyday life almost impossible. In principle only interviews based on questionnaire are carried out, observation is more difficult to make in such short period of time. I try to change this tradition and spend as much time in the field as possible. Observations and writing regular diary are my most important tools.

Two questions have been significant for gaining my anthropological knowlegde: to be foreinger or rather to be Christian and to be a woman. While I was not declaring my religious affiliation, interlocutors accepted a priori that if I am from Poland, I am a Christian. When I was researching Orthodox Christians, they highlighted my Catholicism, but for Muslims I was just “Christian”. Actually, I tried to avoid express openly my religious and political views. Then, depending on my status (unmarried student or independent university scholar, and married mother), I had different groups of interlocutors with whom I could discuss various subjects. One of the most inspiring texts for preparing this paper is a chapter by Diane Freedman (1986) who analyses her position in Romanian village and its changes. At first she came with her husband, then she returned as a young widow and – finally – as a young woman, suitable for re-marriage. All this statuses gave her access to various groups of interlocutors as well as determined (or at least suggested) researched subjects. The second inspiration for this text is an essey by Kirsten Hastrup about her experiences during the fieldwork in Island. She writes very distinctly: “Sex of the anthropologist, elsewhere so inconspicuous in relation to other and much more marked differences, becomes a primary element in the local classification of the ethnographer” (Hastrup 1985: 96).

First case – unmarried girl

Jozef Obrebski in his best – in my opinion – essay “Scandal in the village” (2005) notes that for a long of time he had had a problem with the access to a subject: magical practices. Only non-everyday occurence allowed him to gain some knowlegde as people openly talked about magic, explaining this way an elopement of a young girl from the village. My very first ethnographic research is connected just with magical practices. For my BA thesis I was interested in healing activities within the Orthodox religious practice. So, I was interviewing especially elder women who were healing through praying or looking at the icons. This time I was about 21-22 years old and I was unmarried. Probably this factors allowed me to got some pieces of information about it. I was told, mothers handed on some of their knowledge

to daughters at their age of 14. Then, next lessons daughters get shortly before the marriage – mothers teach them how to deal with a new family and especially with mother-in-law. I was too old to get first part of the knowledge and unmarried, so I could know some practices but, according to my interlocutors, in this case they would not have any magical power. Nevertheless, a magic is exclusively related to women, thus, probably, it was the reason Obrebski's informants were reluctant to talk to him about it.

The same status but in a completely different circumstances I had during my next research. For MA I invented more “male” subject – the cultural role of rakia. In traditional Balkan society women (especially girls; for elderly ladies there were some exceptions) did not sit at the same table with men and did not drink alcohol. Above mentioned Obrebski in his paper on social and customary structure of Macedonian village notes: “She [a healer – K.B.-L.] gains privileges belonging (...) only for men. She can mingle with men at every public meetings (...) she can sit with them at the table, drink rakia with them (...) and even she may venture to use vulgar language that only men are entitled to” (Obrebski 1972: 209-210). When I was asking about this gendered “table division” in contemporary society I was told that the situation has completely changed. My interlocutors admitted nowadays there is no gender difference, women are feminists etc. However, once I noted in a diary: “Prilepec 17.09.2003. Hostess poured some rakia to her husband and to a neighbour [male, in Polish *sqsia*], but to me and herself she gave some juice. All of us was drinking coffee as well”. It is one of the best my example of importance of observation of people’s practices, not only interviewing them.

Second case - “profesorka”

Some years later I brought students (predominantly female) to Macedonia. Altogether we spent in one municipality in Western Macedonia – inhabited by Muslims of different national / ethnic affiliations – ca. two months. A group of ten girls in a village caused numerous suspicions and rumours. We had a lot of problems connected with our sexuality. It was related to perceiving us as “alter” women, ergo Christians who are supposed to be sexually liberal. Such assumption about our faith was supported by our nationality (Pole means Christian or Catholic), dress, and – indeed – behaviour. Certainly we did not cover our heads like most Muslim woman, but we tried to dress very modestly (although it was very hot!). Then, we spent time in public, i.e. a male sphere, talking to people and drinking coffee in the bars. Automatically we were classified as “emancipated”. Not only did our male informants cannot understand we were anthropologists and not tourists, spies or prostitutes, but also they assumed we were more “sexually accessible” (it is a term of Kirsten Hastrup (1985), she mentions her problems with fishermen in Island) than *their* women, Muslim. Nevertheless, our

behaviour was evaluated as we were Muslims. In this place I need to make short digression on gender division in this “Muslim Macedonia”.

Alike in a traditional Balkan society, a strong division between male and female spheres takes place. It means, women and especially girls are hardly seen in public places, like cafes and bars. Most of them do not work at a salaried job, i.e. do not work outside home. They are responsible for keeping house and bringing up children. Girls are not allowed to go out without a permission or accompanying of a male member of her family. Therefore, cafes and bars are fulfilled by men, while women meet with their relatives and neighbours only in the houses or courtyards. There is a good word defining this situation – *shetanje*. Literally it means “walking around”, but contextually it can accept different meaning depending on an actor or rather on the gender of him/her. Thus, Macedonian bachelors are expected to *shetanje*, as they can present themselves to girls – potential spouses, while girls’ *shetanje* was connected with their reputation and gained strong sexual overtone. Married women who *sheta* was condemned for spreading gossips. And, certainly, *shetanje* is forbidden for girls, they can present themselves only through male member of the family.

This time I was not a student, however. I was *profesorka*, that means a teacher, educated woman. Therefore I could get some access to the authorities of the village, like the head of local primary school. I interviewed him twice and got very interesting information, nevertheless I was still exposed to his very intimate questions and open date offers. Such situations forced me to use ethical-doubtful strategies: I was lying that I was married or at least engaged.

Third case – wife and mother

Next year and two years later I came to the field, already married and with a 10-months-old baby boy, accompanied by one female friend. We were renting a house next door to the hostess house. It totally determined my group of interlocutors. In principle, my contacts was limited to one family and I was treated like a fifth daughter-in-law of my hostess. Probably that is why I was treated not as a foreign woman but I included to the value system of the society and my behaviour was evaluated in its categories. Therefore, although only implicate, I was suspected about dissipation and being not a good hostess, wife and mother. What does it mean? I was travelling alone (without husband), thus I was meeting strange men. Then, I came with a little son, therefore I was very irresponsible. However, every day I was receiving a lot of pieces of advice how to bring up my child, including breast feeding. Certainly I had much easier acces to female part of the society, but actually I did not have an opportunity to interview men. For married men I was potential mistress while for bachelors I was simply not attractive.

II. Torbeshi in Macedonian scholarship

In Macedonian scholarship is common that particular ethnic groups are researched only by this groups' representatives (or by foreigners). That is, Macedonian scholars study above all their own group – Macedonians, both Orthodox and Muslims, while Albanians research Albanians, Turks research Turks etc.

Republic of Macedonia is a multi-ethnic and multireligious country. The largest minority constitutes Albanians (it is depending on statistics 20 up to 40 %), following by Turks, Serbs, Roma, Vlachs. After an armed conflict between Albanians and Macedonians in 2001 a Framework Agreement was signed in Ohrid and all ethnic and national groups in Macedonia was concerned as equal and called a “community”. Therefore, nowadays in political discourse in Macedonia neither terms “minorities” nor “nationalities” are used. Other differentiation is religious – Orthodox and Muslims. In the latter group are Albanians, Turks, most of Roma and and the subject of this presentation – Macedonian Muslims. I will elaborate briefly a situation of this group in Macedonian society².

Macedonian Muslims, named also Macedonian-speaking Muslims, Islamicised Muslims or – most popular – Torbeshi – are people whose mother tongue is Macedonian, while confession – Islam. The name Torbeshi is used to describe all Macedonians confessing Islam in the Republic of Macedonia but this ethnonym originally referred only to those from the areas of Debar and Reka, and from the North West part of Macedonia. Because of its etymology, the term Torbeshi is quite often perceived as pejorative. There are several theories about the origin of this term, but the most popular etymology is related to a religious identity and describes the Torbeshi as those “who sold themselves for a sack of cheese” (or, in another version, flour): they are said to have sold their Christian faith to the Turks. Thus, in a scholarship either the term Macedonian Muslims or Macedonian-speaking Muslims, or Islamicised Macedonians are used.

The Torbeshi themselves are not unanimous in self-identification. In part they declare their affiliation to the Macedonian nation, in part they consider themselves as an autonomous ethnic group, while some derive their origin from the Ottoman Turks. Sometimes they declare themselves to be just Muslims (referring this way to a category of “Muslims” as a nationality – introduced in 1960. by J. Broz Tito) or Torbeshi as separate ethnicity. In the latter case the term Torbeshi does not have negative connotations; in contrary – is the only one used. Religion associates Torbeshi with Turks and Albanians. Therefore, depending on the political context, they are regarded either as Turks or as Albanians. Moreover, they start to declare themselves to

² See more about this topic: Bielenin-Lenczowska 2008.

be Turks or Albanians while do not speak this languages. This new national shifts are connected with their living and being marginalized in ethnic Turkish or Albanian surrounding. Language and numerous customs or loyalty to Macedonian place them close to Macedonian majority. Thus, every group wants to incorporate the Torbeshi in order to increase the number of Macedonians, Albanians or Turks living in the Republic of Macedonia.

I will argue, the interest on research Macedonian Muslims is connected with their willing of incorporation into a Macedonian nation. Scholars as well as Macedonian politicians talk about Torbeshi's politicisation in Macedonia, i.e. Albanicisation or Turkicisation (eg. Svetieva 2003). But also Macedonians want to increase a number of their own nationality and include Torbeshi because of their language³.

Under the Ottoman Empire, religion was the only important factor defining identity. The *millet* system segregated the population into Muslims and non-Muslims: all Muslims were considered "Turks" and all Orthodox Christians "Greeks" (certainly, we cannot relate those names with a modern notion of nationality). During the time of socialist Macedonia they were first treated as ethnic Turks, then (in the 1950s and 1960s) they were encouraged to adopt Macedonian national identity. However, only in the late 1970s more serious and coordinated attempt to integrate Muslims in Macedonian majority was undertaken and an organisation of Macedonian Muslims was established with the support of Macedonian branch of Yugoslav League of Communists who wanted to diminish the influence of the Albanians in Western Macedonia.

Nowadays, Islam in Macedonia is predominantly associated with Albanians. Both the Torbeshi and the Turks complain that they have been assimilated by the Albanian majority via the Albanian language used in worship in mosques, Albanian hojas and representatives in Islamic organizations, etc. Moreover, there is a tension between Albanians and other minorities linked especially with the social memory of armed conflict of 2001.

In Macedonian political and academic discourse regarding Torbeshi, this group is consider to be Macedonians who converted into Islam during the time of Ottoman Empire. When the state established an organization under the name "The Culture and Science Centre of Macedonian Muslims", its official line was: "Torbesh are local people, i.e. Macedonians; but the Ottomans converted them forcefully". In Macedonian official discourse, opinion about forced Islamisation is widespread – after all, in numerous academic publications about Torbeshi the term Islamised Macedonians is used. Ethnologist and Macedonian Muslim, Nijazi Limanoski, in his writings, understood Macedonianess through language, customs, origin and folklore

³ One of the very few distinguishing and reflexive papers on this issue is an essay written by Ljupcho Risteski (2009). Text is published in Polish but I hope it will be translated into Macedonian.

common to all Macedonians. Islam is in his opinion additional feature and had not deeply changed the social and spiritual life of the Macedonian Muslims. Islamisation and isolation of Torbeshi from the rest of the Macedonian nation is described as the beginning of a heroic path and one full of sacrifices for the Muslim population of Slavic origin on the territory of Macedonia, the end of which will be the recognition of the Macedonianess of this population by the rest of the Macedonian nation. Nowadays, only part of Macedonian Muslims agree with Limanoski. Rather they do not want to diminish the role of Islam in their collective identity. Moreover, there are strong struggles for proving their ethnic distinction. It is one of the goals of a Party for European Future (*Partija za Evropska Idnina*) established in 2005. Their representatives claim, their *nationality* is a Torbesh. They also try to show that they are descendants of the bogomils in the Balkans, thus not forced islamised Christians and the term “Torbesh” means a person who carry bag (with books, as they were missionaries).

Conclusion

Issues and problems in the field presented in this paper are certainly not unique for Republic of Macedonia. It is obvious that foreign, and especially independent researcher has many problems with presentation her/his intentions and can be admitted as a spy, prostitute, tourist etc. It is well written in anthropological literature alike role of a positionality (gender, age, social status) in the field. As I showed, my changing status defined my group of interlocutors as well as determined – to some extent – researched subjects. My current professional interest, i.e. working with Muslims, regardless of their national affiliation, evoked suspicions among Christians who perceived me as pro-Albanian and pro-Muslim. Because of political tension between Macedonian and Albanians, I had to use some strategies in order to avoid presenting my political and religious views. The other problem is an academic ideologisation of the group researched – Torbeshi. Interest in research them in Macedonian scholarship is connected with their incorporation into Macedonian nation. The only official version of nationality of Torbeshi is that they are Macedonian who convert into Islam during the period of Ottoman Empire. Their declarations of different affiliation like Albanians or Turks are explained in categories of politicisation – Albanicisation and Turkicisation. It means, Torbeshi, because of their religion, are exposed to Islam or rather Albanian or Turkish political activities. But in fact also Macedonians, including scholars, grow the same propaganda.

References:

Bielenin-Lenczowska K., The Construction of Identity in a Multi-Ethnic Community: A Case Study on the Torbeši of Centar Župa Commune, Western Macedonia (FYROM) – *Ethnologia Balkanica*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 167-181.

Freedman D., Wife, Widow, Woman: Roles of an Anthropologist in a Transylvanian Village, in: P. Golde (ed.) *Women in the field. Anthropological experiences*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986, pp. 333-357.

Hastrup K., Fieldwork among friends: ethnographic exchange within the Northern civilization, [w:] *ASA Monographs 25. Anthropology at home*, red. Anthony Jackson, University of Keele, 1985.

Obrębski J., Obrzędowa i społeczna struktura wsi macedońskiej, „*Etnografia Polska*”, t. XVI, z. 1, 1972.

Obrębski J., Skandal we wsi, in: *Dzisiejsi ludzie Polesia*, ed. A. Engelking, Warszawa, 2005, pp. 53-70.

Risteski Lj., Dynamika tożsamości Torbeszów w Republice Macedonii, in. *Sąsiedztwo w obliczu konfliktu. Relacje społeczne i etniczne w zachodniej Macedonii – refleksje antropologiczne*, ed. K.

Bielenin-Lenczowska, Warszawa 2009, pp. 179-191.

Svetieva A., Politicization of the ethnic identity of the Torbesh (the “Nashinci”). In: *EthnoAnthropoZoom 4*, Skopje 2004, pp. 26-69, available at: http://www.iea.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/EAZ/EAZ_03/EAZ_2004_PDF/EAZ_2003_Ponizeni_Balkan_Ang.pdf (17.12.2010).

