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**NOBODY WANTS TO BE THE BLACK SHEEP.
ETHNOGRAPHY OF UNMARRIED OF PORECHE***

Abstract: The population decline that has been affecting Macedonian villages for over sixty years is due to people migrating from villages to cities, also known as rural flight. Some of the villages still have a few old inhabitants, however it is expected that soon after they die, those villages will meet the same destiny as the ones that have been already abandoned. After the Second World War, the industrialization motivated many of the village inhabitants to find work in the opening factories, in search of a better life. Consequently, no one was trying to improve the living conditions in the villages; therefore, people never migrated back from cities to villages. Poreche, for example, is an area with living conditions that have not been improved, while also not having good connection with the urban centres. Therefore, from the beginning of the 21st century this area has been isolated from the rest of the world. Young people usually do not like this lifestyle, so when they move to the big places because of their education and see the lifestyle the people over there lead, they have no desire to go back. Girls have it easier when it comes to staying in the cities, often enough they marry at a young age, leaving behind the boys from the villages who stay unmarried. Because of the harsh conditions, the boys find themselves in a situation where they cannot find a wife who would accept to come and live with them in the village whilst not being able to leave the villages and move to the city because of their financial problems. Eventually, most of them end up sitting in front of the village shop with a beer in their hand.

Key words: old bachelors, women, spouse, Poreche

In this text I will talk about the old bachelors, or men who have reached a certain age and have not been able to start a family, in the region of Poreche. The goal is to show their position in their community, their perception of themselves, how society perceives them, their everyday struggle with their solitary life and the different ways they use to look for a spouse. The foundation of this research is comprised by the statements given by the so called old bachelors accompanied with the statements of a few older men and women. Every intimate story told by the old bachelors that was shared with the author is colourful in its own way; every single one of them contributes to better understanding of their search for a spouse. A search they have started voluntarily or have been pushed in by their community, so in the end, society's expectations become their expectations as well.

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Different decisions are made to solve this “problem”. In the rural surroundings it is still acceptable to get married with the help of a matchmaker. This is something that all of the old bachelors said to be the safest decision. The reason for this is that getting married with the help of a matchmaker worked for many generations in their surroundings; therefore for them it seems to be the most convenient way to get married. Another reason is that the old bachelors are most commonly obliged to stay in the village because of work. They cannot leave their cattle or their land and go in search of a bride and most of them cannot afford to leave. Therefore they feel that giving their savings to a matchmaker is the safest way to find a bride. They presume that he will do his job, because going to find a bride themselves seems uncertain and they ran the risk to lose all of their money by doing so.

When it comes to age, the community of Poreche has a limit after which every unmarried man is considered to be an old bachelor. The age limit to becoming an old bachelor is around thirty. Even though all of the interlocutors had surpassed this limit, none of them wanted to speak about numbers. Nobody wanted to answer the question: At what age is a person considered an old bachelor? They treated this question as if it was part of an abstract category and only replayed “I don’t know”. It was obvious that they were aware of the community’s criteria for becoming an old bachelor. Each of them showed signs of being uncomfortable with the question by turning their head away or by making certain movements. By being aware of their age, they found themselves in an inconvenient situation. Therefore no one wanted to define the limit of becoming an old bachelor.

The reason for this was probably the connection between the word old and the word bachelor, which are two quite contradictory words, and, even though the term old bachelor existed in their surroundings, they did not want to associate it with themselves. This is quite logical because in the folklore, old age is associated with being powerless and a burden to the community, as well as being unable to reproduce. Aside from this, “since children and old people are useless in the sense of reproduction and labour, they become just another mouth to feed. Mocking the sexual and reproductive impairment of old males is a common motive in erotic folk tales” (Jakimovska 2009: 197). Even though they were too young to be defined as old, they still avoided giving any answers that would associate them with the word old. Their inability to meet the expectations of the community such as not starting a family makes them feel inferior, meaning; they did not achieve what in their community is considered to be the proper social behaviour or just normal. By not having a family, they seem to have stayed in a place that is neither here nor there, even though they have reached a certain age when it is convenient to get married. “...Reaching the age of sexual maturity has its own limit after which the individual is expected to start a family and by doing so they would cross over from one social status to another (they would go from being a girl into a woman or from being a boy to being a man). The change in the reproductive status is connected with the physical growing and development of the body, as well as the declining in the body that happens in old age, this change in the body is a reflection of its biological time. However this biological time becomes relevant to define the adult groups only when it intertwines with the social time of the individual - that is the time when the biological age becomes a foundation for the social age” (Jakimovska 2009: 174).

One of the interlocutors indicated that the age of thirty that happens to be defined as the limit to becoming an old bachelor, is the age when a person's outlook is changed and also the person who surpassed the limit becomes more introverted and therefore that person's interests start to change. Also, his social circle consists of married and older men. Telling me this was almost as if he had given me a confirmation that the age of thirty is a fictitious limit that does in fact exist in the notion of the bachelors and not just in the notion of their community. After the surpassing of the limit, the bachelors start to change and even though they did not confirm that any age would define them as elderly, they no longer fell in the category of the younger generation. This is not something that can be easily acknowledged to oneself or to anybody else for that matter, especially not to a newcomer that happens to be a woman.

A gender imbalance

Obrembski gives us some information regarding the insufficiency of women in Poreche, "Yet, certain phenomena show that the matrimonial relations in Gorno Poreche have to be regarded in the interest of the male population. There is a steady, though not very large, outflow of women from G. Poreche, which does not correspond with the reverse process. This is due to the high price of the marriage of a male from G. Poreche to a woman from the agricultural region, which is not beneficial to the local men. The main difficulties in finding a spouse for the widowers, to whom young girls were contested to marry, shows that there is in fact a big insufficiency of women in the local area" (Obrembski 2001: 253). Nowadays, the situation is even more drastic than before, unmarried young women are almost impossible to find. The harsh living conditions, the isolation of the area, as well as the difficulties of abandoning the traditional norms, which still apply mainly to the female population, are all influencing women to leave these villages by marrying at a young age. Their decisions to marry at a young age are supported by their parents, who encourage them to marry as far away from the villages as possible. After they finish their middle school education in the Samokov School, the young people from the villages usually go to Makedonski Brod, Prilep, Kichevo, Tetovo or Skopje for further education. For some, this is the first time they would leave the rural environment where they grew up. The difference in lifestyle that they would feel in the new place makes them wish that they never go back to their villages. The girls accomplish this goal easier than the boys, when they marry in the bigger cities. They meet their potential husbands during their studying years, and some of them decide to get married after they finish high school only to stay in the cities. Driven by the desire to leave as soon as possible they also agree to mixed marriages, meaning they get married to Macedonian Muslims or Albanians from the nearby villages or cities.

The permanent settling in the cities by getting married is much more difficult to accomplish for the boys, mainly because they, unlike the girls, need to meet different conditions. First of all they need to have their own home in the city as well as a job in order to support their families. Meeting these conditions is difficult from the boys of Poreche, because they come from poor families, therefore, buying any kind of real estate in the cities would be impossible. Even if they decided to rent an apartment or a house in the city, that would still be really difficult for them. Their financial problems also

inhibit them from having a higher education that would contribute to finding better jobs. Pressured by expectations to start a family as soon as possible, by tradition, by the fact that there are almost no women in the area and the few women residing there don't see them as possible candidates as well as because of their financial situation, the men try to find an escape in drinking beer in front of the village shops.

When defining a desired partner in the traditional sense, the general attractiveness of the potential candidates is estimated based on their skills and abilities associated with everyday chores. While the "urban" view on marriage considers love to be one of the basic terms for its realisation, love was not mentioned at all by the old bachelors. The need for having a spouse seemed like a merely practical thing to them. The Basic purpose of a marriage according to them was more or less, getting help with the everyday chores, making children and assistance when they grow old. "Having someone who will give you a sip of water" (I., 1967, Upper (Gorno) Poreche). By fulfilling this "necessity" they would experience a change in their social status, which for now is regarded as inconvenient, at least by their community. Therefore, by marrying they would become "full members" of their rural community. The absence of love as a concept or as a desired element and term for getting married can be understood as a practical move for solving one or more problems. None of the old bachelors spoke of the desire for a woman or being the object of desire. None of them wished for love.

The profiles of the desired brides

Every single one of the old bachelors had an image of what their future wife would be like. All of their statements were generally based on their ideas or ideals of how things should work and were not based on their personal experiences. Subsequently, it is quite interesting how much they would stand their ground being faithful to the traditional rules and norms when talking about their potential marriages as well as speaking about the relationships between men and women. Generally speaking, all of them agreed that their potential bride should be around the same age as them, since they thought that they would have a better understanding with a woman their age, than if they married a younger woman because younger women are less mature and this would bring disharmony to the marriage. If you take the age difference in consideration, surely a younger bride would have different interests that would lead to a failed marriage. A younger woman might not prioritize her home and family or their future together; she also might be more interested in partying, which would contribute to lack of understanding and again lead to a failed marriage. Being aware of all the risks they are taking with the possibility of choosing the wrong bride at their age, the most reasonable choice was to find a wife that is their age.

According to them, their opinion of what an ideal wife would be like was to some extent the same. They demanded that she should be a housewife; also that she should be "normal", "smart" and "understanding". Another thing was that doing the chores should be a priority to her and doing chores in a rural environment refers to doing laundry by hand and baking bread herself. Being aware that the rural surroundings have bad living conditions, the interlocutors stated that if she were willing to do the chores they would contribute to making the living conditions better. They said:

“This is a place where homemade bread is being baked at a daily bases, the laundry is done by hand, but if needed we can get a washing machine and other things, a washing machine is not a problem at all. She should do her chores” (I., 1972, Gorno Poreche).

They all stated that they would help their brides with the chores but would not take over the responsibly. The interlocutor said that if the bride did not know how to cook, he was willing to do it himself but only to explain it and to teach her and from the moment she learns, she should continue doing it herself. It was as if he was afraid that if he continues to do the cooking she would get used to it and expect him to do that always.

M.T.: “Okay. What else is important to you? She should be a housewife, she should know stuff, and what should she do”?

I.: “Well, even if she does not know, she will learn. I will explain it to her, It is important that she understands, you know what I mean? She should understand that she needs to make me dinner, and do my laundry. That is what I mean by understand” (I., 1975, Gorno Poreche).

When talking about doing chores, inappropriate behaviour and not knowing some things about it, especially in front of guests were associated with a low IQ by one of the bachelors. He described the woman that would behave like that as “dumb”. Receiving guests was an important characteristic for the ideal woman as described by one of the bachelors. “She should think correctly, she should know how to receive guests, how to send the guests away appropriately, to work” (I., 1967, Gorno Poreche). Basically it is also important what the others think of the wife as well. Besides the fact that this feature was associated with intelligence and, more important, with distinguishing “proper” behaviour, it is obvious that according to this desired characteristic of the future wife, the opinion and the perspective of the surrounding are still important. The inappropriate behaviour in front of guests would be interpreted as her being a bad housewife, which would then lead to the husband being gossiped about in the village. Being gossiped is an undesirable situation for an old bachelor who wishes to divest himself from one displeasing social status, and if the bride behaves in such a manner he would have to face what he calls: “They are pointing fingers at me” (I., 1967, Gorno Poreche).

A bride’s chastity was not considered as a deciding factor either. Most of the interlocutors expressed disbelief that virgin women exist and if they do exist, the bachelors said that they are either dumb or something must be wrong with them. Since they have been with a woman before, they did not have the right to demand a virgin wife. By saying this they showed that to some extent they considered women as equals, contrary to the past when a woman had to be a virgin before she got married, while this rule did not apply to the men.

Despite the fact that the bachelors did not mind if their potential bride was a virgin or not, one example of an older woman showed that this moral norm is still considered to be a rule for her generation. She described the unusual arrival of her daughter in law from another part of Macedonia, the reasons for the girl’s behaviour and the reasons that led to her arrival in Poreche. This girl lost her virginity with a boy from the same high school, the fact that she was rarely at home made her mother suspicious, she told her mother that she was sleeping over at a friend’s house, when in fact she was sleeping

over at her boyfriend's house. When her mother found out, she wanted to chop her head off with an axe, placing her head on a log. Afraid of what might happen to her, the girl decided to run away from home and to get married. She heard about the old bachelors in Poreche, so she left with a man whose brother in law needed a wife. When they arrived in Poreche the man called his brother in law and offered the girl to him. At first the bachelor could not believe what he had just heard, but he did agree to get married that same night. After they met and liked each other, he brought her home. After a while the girl told her mother in law all about why she left home and when the mother in law found out that her daughter in law was not a virgin on her wedding night, she was outraged and could not comprehend how her son could have agreed to marry a girl like that. Aside from the fact that the girl had only one boyfriend before her marriage, the mother in law considered that as inappropriate behaviour and was suspicious that maybe the daughter in law had "ten boyfriends" before her son and not just one, classifying her as a "slut" (I., 1952, Gorno Poreche). From speaking with the daughter in law, it can be concluded that she never spoke to her son about his intimate affairs, because it is obvious that this kind of conversation is still not allowed between a mother and a son, while, she can discuss this topic with her daughter in law, considering her gender, although she is a stranger and a new member of the family.

All of the interlocutors considered that having intercourse was an obligation for the wife and if she refused, this would upset the husband who would then have the right to find another woman. The only justification according to one of the bachelors would be if she was on her period, but even if she were on her period, he would still have the right to go to another woman, because his wife refused to have intercourse with him. The pressure is even greater if the wife is unemployed and the husband is obliged to support her financially. The bachelor's opinion on a situation such as this one was that she did not have anything else to do except to "make herself ready" because "everything was paid for her" (I., 1975, Gorno Poreche). This implies that she should want to satisfy her husband at any time. Not being able to fulfil this obligation according to the bachelor, would lead to conflicts, infidelity and even divorce. He considered the wife to be at fault for all of that. He also believed that this situation might lead to him being violent towards her and her poisoning him in the end. He concluded that women are at fault for everything, especially for not respecting and fulfilling their marital duties, causing their husbands and children to suffer. He then gave a solution to this problem by saying that women should be stripped of many rights, because he believed that this would bring back the order from a time when women were obedient to men and the stability of a marriage would be restored.

There is yet to be told about the attitudes and wishes of the old bachelors, however what truly makes an impact is that aside from the harsh conditions in which they found themselves and their incapability to fulfil society's expectations or as one of the bachelors said: "being a black chick" (or sheep), they would still not marry just any girl. Their bride needs to meet some conditions and even though some of the criteria from the past has been changed, some of it such as the traditional norms, remained partially the same. Even though this isolated part of the country was to some extent touched by the contemporary ways of the modern world, when choosing their brides, the bachelors kept their traditional way of thinking, influenced by their upbringing and their surroundings.

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