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**TALES OF THE ‘ORTHODOX NATION’ AND ‘MACEDONIAN FAITH’  
EASTER AT MACEDONIANS IN PORECHE IN SCOPE OF RE-  
GIME, ETHNIC AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE REPUBLIC OF  
MACEDONIA**

*Abstract:* This paper is based on my fieldwork in Poreche Region (Republic of Macedonia), in 2010, 2011, 2013 and 2014. My research focused on the meaning of the Easter holiday for the local community in Makedonski Brod during Macedonian post-communism transformation and also during transition from Yugoslav to an independent state. In a difficult period of transition and under real threat to Macedonians’ subjectivity (by Greeks, Bulgarians and some Albanian groups, see also not-recognition autocephaly of Macedonian Orthodox Church by Serbian and other Orthodox Churches), regular meetings, rituals, talks, storytelling and common fun strengthen local identity. They integrate community and ease people’s concerns about their future and (their?) country. Religion here is ‘code of meanings’ and it builds social cohesiveness, it’s also – as I observed – the ‘memory’ of local communities and the nation (see Hervieu-Leger’s theory). Rituals and others symbolic practices of the Holy Week period (such as gathering, processions, Towers *kuli* play etc.) are part of social performance, during which residents of Makedonski Brod remember, (re)build, present and play (perform) their own identity and knowledge about the past of the community. National and local identities are constructed on the basis of Christian religion, territory of town and region, Macedonian language (especially local dialect), and various specific habits and customs. For local people Christianity is not only religion, but national identity (“our Macedonian religion”, “our Orthodox Christian nation”), and it’s opposite, the “Turkish religion”, synonymous of Islam, represented these days by *Others* - Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia and especially by radical political Islamic groups (it’s important to say that other Albanian and Islamic groups - especially the Bektashi order - are not seen as dangerous. There is cohabitation and understanding between them and the Orthodox Macedonians, for example during the festival of St George in Makedonski Brod).

This article discusses symbolic practices, repeated year after year during Easter by the Macedonians from Makedonski Brod in Poreche. It shows how this holiday preserves the whole community, its identity and territory as well as putting symbolic order into people’s everyday life.

*Key words:* Easter holiday, religion, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, storytelling, performance, Macedonian identity, inter ethnic and international relations.

Anthropologists observe growth of the role of religion in post colonial and post-soviet reality. Clifford Geertz explains that this phenomenon is related to greater existential anxiety rising from people being disillusioned with ideological metanarrations, such as liberalism, socialism, modernization or nationalism (Geertz 2003: 219-223). Geertz states that newly created countries distance themselves from those values as central elements creating group identity in favour of religion. It can be said that it is religion, which together with nationalism create an explosive mixture, thus becoming the basis for identities, and strengthened ethnic and national borders<sup>1</sup>. Grzegorz Babiński writes about the process of “nationalizing” universal religions (quotation marks - G.B.) (Babiński 2003: 17). Nowadays, however not for the first time, religion is a tool for achieving political and economical domination, and religious communities become core of the fight for power – local, national and international. Boris Buden goes even further and claims as a matter of fact that “religion owes its life only to its political meaning. It can become political – and not just as a non-political means to a political end – because it is not placed outside of (...) diplomacy but is located within. What makes it political is in fact its cultural translatability, in other words, the ability to be re-articulated as fundamental social antagonism and, as a consequence, establishing the society anew as cultural community” (Buden 2012: 129). In my opinion the first point of this thesis is debatable because it’s too reductionist. Marcin Lubaś thinks that in Central and Southern Europe it is a part of revitalization of traditions from the pre-communism period. He writes, “Although this phenomenon can be found in every country of the region, it is most apparent in the area of (...) Yugoslavia, where local form of communism was superseded by radical nationalisms, often lined with religious content” (Lubaś 2008: 17). At the same time I agree with Robert M. Hayden who writes, “I reject the idea that socialism marked a complete break from earlier social and cultural practices” (Hayden 2002: 161; see also Lubaś 2008: 9-29). The fact that there is no – in the case of Yugoslavia, but also in a wider scope – question of a permanent stop to cultural continuity or “inventing tradition” from the beginning is also confirmed by my own studies of religiousness and religious culture in Macedonia<sup>2</sup>.

This article is based on my ethnographic and anthropological studies led since 2006 in the Republic of Macedonia. In years 2010-2011 and 2013-2014 I had the possibility of observing the above mentioned phenomena in a microscale during the celebration of Easter in Makedonski Brod in the Poreche region. During the celebration of the most important Christian feast, *the Holiday of holidays*, people from Brod spin tales of

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth adding that in the Ottoman Empire, consisting among others of Albanian, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Serbian lands, religion was the main determinant of communal identity. Being a part of one of millets or one of Orthodox Churches was understood as being a part of a nation (Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian and after the fall of the Empire also Albanian and, questioned, Macedonian). National identities in the Balkans are mostly based on the church and faith, with the exception of Albanians – religiously diverse and basing their identity on the language and blood. As Pashko Vasa, Albanian independence activist says „religion of Albanians is albanisam” (See Poulton 1979: 13-32, Kitromilides 1989: 177-185).

<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the concept of identity, even though I recognize that group identity is of performative in nature (therefore is not absolutely *constant*), I also agree with Ewa Thompson that the continuity of identity cannot be radically negated because “[a]ssuming the rule that human identities (...) do not have constant elements leads in fact to respecting interests of only the most powerful” (Thompson 2008: 51-52).

their history and *perform* their identity. The first part of the article consists of political and social background of the ‘Easter tales’ from Brod. The second part constitutes an ethnographic description of the holiday and description of the meaning of Easter and its mutual celebration for the Macedonians of Poreche.

## **“FYROM” - “The Zone of Passage” From Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Republic of Macedonia, from Communist Secularization to National Religions**

Macedonia separated from Yugoslavia in 1991. It was the first contemporary independent state of Macedonia<sup>3</sup>. However, Macedonians still have to negotiate and defend their identity and independence<sup>4</sup>. There is no other country in Europe, barring Bosnia and Herzegovina, with such numerous and multifaceted issues as with the Republic of Macedonia. When the ‘great narration’ of the Yugoslavian *bratstvo i jedinstvo* fell apart, the country was spared the bloodshed from disintegrating Socialist Federation but it again became an apple of discord for its neighbours as well as for ‘great powers’. The Southern neighbour of the new country questioned its right to the name ‘Macedonia’ (that is why Macedonia is sometimes called FYROM - Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and to the symbols Alexander of Macedon. Moreover, Athens continues anti-Macedonian politics (e.g. blocks Macedonian access to the European Union and NATO, which endangers not only Macedonia itself but also peace in the region) and suppresses the Macedonian minority living in the Aegean Macedonia. Another issue is the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute about the status of Macedonian language and Macedonian national identity, as well as the question of autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, not recognized as separate from the Serbian Orthodox Church by other Orthodox countries. The internal situation of the country is also unstable due to the complex ethnic and religious structure and weak economy.

According to the census of 2002, the population of Macedonia equals 2 022547 people<sup>5</sup>, with 64,2% of Macedonians, 25,2% of Albanians, 3,9% of Turks, 2,7% of Roma, 1,8% of Serbs and 2,4% of members of other nations. The dominant religion remains Orthodox Christianity, which was claimed by 61,6% of the people, whereas 34,2% of the people define themselves as Muslims<sup>6</sup>. An important fact is that most of the Macedonians

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<sup>3</sup> It can be said that the first one was the Republic of Kruševo – multiethnic country formed in Macedonia in 1903 during the Ilinden Uprising as a representation of Macedonian resistance against the Turks. Although uprising was suppressed with bloodshed and the Republic of Krusevo lasted only 10 days, they became an important national symbol for Macedonians.

<sup>4</sup> While the motto of popular political movement of Albanians from Kosovo was, „Jo Negociata – Vetëvendosje!” (“No negotiations - Self-determination!”).

<sup>5</sup> Data from 2011, 2 058 539, Estimations of the Population by Sex and Age, by Municipalities and by Statistical Regions, [on-line:] <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/2.4.12.08.pdf>, [01.08.2013].

<sup>6</sup> Data from 2010, 39,3%, Religious Composition by Country, in Percentages [on-line:] <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/>, [01.07.2014].

claim to be Orthodox<sup>7</sup> and ca. 90% Macedonian Albanians (Gegs) are Muslim<sup>8</sup> (mostly Sunni Hanafi and some Bektashi, although I have noticed the rise in radical attitudes, based on political and/or financial purposes) (Пери 2003: 369). The overlapping of religious and ethnic division strengthens the feeling of alienation on both sides<sup>9</sup>, enhanced by cultural and linguistic differences. Difficult coexistence of both groups has deep roots. In the times of Ottoman Empire, Christians were *raja* – second-class citizens. As Adam Balcer states, “In the Ottoman times, Muslim Albanian begs in Kosovo and Macedonia were the masters of Orthodox, Slavonic peasants. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they opposed emancipation of their servants and equality of Muslim and Christian rights. Religious practice is greater in Kosovo and Macedonia than it is in Albania, as the countries have not undergone the cultural revolution of Enver Hoxha. The most religious and religiously homogeneous of all Albanians are the ones from Macedonia. Traditionally, they were closest to *umma*, as, unlike in Kosovo, they lived side by side with numerous Muslim ethnic minorities (Turks, Roma, Slavonic Muslims). In effect, Islam was a tool of ‘Albanisation’ of the ethnic minorities” (Balcer 2002: 47). On the other hand, in Yugoslavia it was the Albanians who were perceived as second-class citizens. After the Balkan wars (1912-1913) almost 45% of Albanians found themselves beyond borders of Albania, becoming a minority in every Yugoslavian republic (with the greatest representation in Western Macedonia, Kosovo and Southern Montenegro). They were recognized as a Yugoslavian nation as late as in 1971 (Пери 2003: 386), and during the reign of the Serbian politician, Aleksander Rankovic, the minister of internal affairs and a close associate of Tito, the country led anti-Albanian politics up to 1966; this line was later continued by Slobodan Milošević<sup>10</sup>. The answer to this phenomenon was Albanian nationalism, aiming at uniting Albanians in one national country (the concept of ‘Great Albania’).

The Albanian-Macedonian clash intensified after Macedonian declaration of independence in 1991. It was caused by the fact that many Macedonian Albanians treat Albania state as their “mother”, their relations to Kosovo are even greater and the separate economic and political interests are placed above the well-being of Macedonia and building a civil state. In the new country, Albanians demanded rights equal to those the Macedonians had but Macedonians wanted the country to be mostly Macedonian. The situation in Kosovo caused even more tension. In 1998-1999, during the so called Kosovan crisis, Macedonia sheltered 360.000 Kosovan refugees, mostly Albanians<sup>11</sup>. It was 18% of overall population of the Republic of Macedonia. Opening the border and taking in such

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<sup>7</sup> The identity of Macedonian-speaking Muslims is another question, some identify themselves as Macedonians, some as a separate ethnic group - Torbesh (on the other hand, perceive this name as pejorative). As a result of propaganda and actions of political parties, the Macedonian-speaking Muslims learn Turkish or Albanian and declare themselves as members of Turkish or Albanian Ethnic Community. More information on the group can be found in Bielenin-Lenczowska 2013, 2009; Lubaš 2011).

<sup>8</sup> In western Macedonia there is also small group of *Orthodox Albanians* (known as *Shkret*) – see the paper of Kijewska in Bielenin-Lenczowska 2009: 170.

<sup>9</sup> The question of religion in the Albanian-Macedonian conflict was analyzed by Adam Balcer (Balcer 2002: 43-57).

<sup>10</sup> More on relations between Albania and Serbia, Vickers 1998. However the book was published just before the forced mass migration from Kosovo.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees report, [on-line:] <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=3b31e166c> [30.10.2013].

a number of refugees – even though most of them eventually left Macedonia – by a poor and weak republic (additionally weakened by trade embargo issued by Greece in 1994 and embargo issued by UN against Yugoslavia) resulted in ethno-political and economic destabilization of the country<sup>12</sup>.

These two different visions of nationality and future of Macedonia in 2001 led to military conflict between Macedonian Albanians, heavily supported by Kosovars, and Macedonians. The conflict ended in intervention of Western forces and signing of Ohrid Framework Agreement, increasing and protecting the rights of the Albanian minority. The Agreement stopped further bloodshed but also it aggravated the mutual distrust and aversion, pushing both ethnic communities further apart.

The celebration of Easter in Makedonski Brod in the Poreche region is described and analyzed in relation to the presented background. Makedonski Brod is a town populated by 3740 people (with over 99% of Orthodox Macedonians)<sup>13</sup>, the administrative centre of Makedonski Brod commune and of the mountainous region of Poreche<sup>14</sup>. Traditionally, Poreche is divided into Upper (Samokov being the main village) and Lower (with the leading role of Brod – the only town in the region and the destination of villagers' migrations<sup>15</sup>). The region is located in central part of Western Macedonia. This part of the country undergoes processes of gradual abandoning of Macedonian villages, rise in the number of Albanian population and Albanisation of Macedonian-speaking Muslims.

For the people of Makedonski Brod, Holy Week and three-day celebrations of Easter are one of the most important events in the yearly cycle. In this article I attempt to discover the meaning of the Pasch for the community of Brod. I am particularly interested here in its social meaning. I have noticed three main themes of the celebration – locality, nation, religious genealogy. They intertwine into one narration of the past of local community, its affiliation with a greater religious and national community. In the exploration of the themes I employed concepts of social and cultural memory, following the definition coined by Barbara Szacka and Kaja Kaźmierska, „the collective memory relates, although slightly, to individual biographic experiences and bases on the communal image of the past. As a consequence, it is rather a form of knowledge of the past and not a memory of the past events” (Kaźmierska 2012: 46). I was inspired by the theoretical concepts of Clifford Geertz, Anthony P. Cohen and Victor and Edith Turner, related to the symbolic side of human actions. Both holiday and celebration can be studied as a cultural or social performance – my studies suggest that in Makedonski Brod they fulfill the role of ‘memory performance’ and constitute ‘manifestation of identity’, they serve creating social cohesion in the times of changes, endangering the current order and existential security of the studied group. I understand them as means to (re)constitute and strengthen the community as well as a survival strategy for the dynamic Macedonian (meaning, in the

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<sup>12</sup> An additional factor destabilizing the country and state situation is high birthrate among Albanians (between the year 1991 and 2002, the number of Albanians in Macedonia increased by over 64 000 people - this number may also include refugees from Kosovo), especially among traditional Muslims from Kosovo, settling in North-West Macedonia (regions of Tetovo, Gostivar and Kičevo).

<sup>13</sup> Data from census of 2002.

<sup>14</sup> More on the social, religious and economic situation in Poreche and Western Macedonia see, Makurat (in press).

<sup>15</sup> Although the search for jobs and a better life leads people to the capital town or abroad.

Republic of Macedonia) ethnic, religious and political reality. The analysis of the material proved the thoughts of Paul Connerton, published in *How Societies Remember* (Connerton 1996), in which the author analyses ways of transferring and maintaining group memory, including their identity, most useful. According to Connerton's findings, building on the works of Durkheim, Halbwachs and Nora, the group memory is transmitted by the memory storages - body, space, and measure of time. Connerton also enumerates three rhetorics of recreating the prototypical events, the calendar, the verbal and with gesture (Connerton 1996: 143). Following the above mentioned findings, Orthodox calendar of saints and Orthodox Liturgy performed – in Macedonian and Church-Slavonic – by a priest of the Macedonian Orthodox Church can be deemed memory storages. Connerton stresses that, „The period of time evoked by the Gospels and recalled in the liturgy is not (...) a mythical time, and the events annually recapitulated in the sacred calendar are not to be thought of as events that occurred (...) *in illo tempore*. The events took place in a datable history and at clearly defined historical period (...) in which Pontius Pilate was governor in Judaea. Those events (...) are commemorated annually in the Good Friday and Easter festivals. The whole Christian year is articulated around the paschal period which recapitulates and re-enacts, in the sequence of the ceremonies and the content of the prayers, the various phases of the Passion” (Connerton 1996: 103). Therefore, the phenomenon of the Macedonians – whose subjectivity is still questioned and threatened – stressing their Christianity, or even identifying the Macedonian nationality with being Orthodox, may not only be an inheritance of the Ottoman millet system, but rather seeking the continuity in history of the Church – on the one hand related to the Cyrillo-Methodian inheritance, on the other – to a religious line going back to Jesus of Nazareth. As Daniele Hervieu-Leger notices, „a group is identified (...) by a religious line. It emerges and recreates itself on the basis of memory, which helps in self-identification. The basis of every religious faith is (...) the faith in an unbroken line of believers. This continuity (...) is confirmed and expressed in actions – religious in nature – recalling (anamnesis) the past, which gives meaning to the present and contains future. In most cases, anamnesis takes form of a ritual. (...) [T]he regular repetition of gestures and words fixed in a ritual serves as filling the course of time (together with filling the course of life of every being embodied in the line) with memory of the original events, which created the line and/or being a specific testimony of its continuous existence, in spite of changing fortunes, which have and still are endangering its very existence” (Hervieu-Leger 2007: 169-170).

In Makedonski Brod, father Marko, the head priest of the commune and the most important (apart from the local Cultural Centre) initiator of celebrations, is the main officiant of the abovementioned events. He has been the town's priest (in Orthodox Christian tradition - *pop*) since 1982. As he says, even though the communism (father Marko claims that in Macedonia communism was the main ideology in 1941-1991) prohibited religious practices, he – and a group of volunteers – reinstated them. During his interview, he speaks of “reinstating the tradition” – before he came to Makedonski Brod, churches had been used as barns, Easter celebrations were limited to the church grounds (processing around the church three times, *pokrsti* only around the church, and *towers* (described later in the article) were treated by the communists as a secular, people's tradition and were not prohibited). The celebrations were organized by people of Brod (nowadays with help from the Church and Cultural Centre). According to the priest “some farmers, old Brodians in the times of communism were very brave and, in spite of official orders

to close churches, those who respected their faith, their nation, themselves, would not let the values be harmed and since 08.04.1991 we wear crosses and perform *towers* just as today”<sup>16</sup>. In nowadays, in still “transitional” and uncertain times, the manifestation of religious identity and telling own (*hi*)*story* is also vital for the studied community – as the priest says, “Macedonia is fighting for its faith and identity, Macedonia is a Biblical land”.

At the beginning, the main organizers and participants of the procession with crosses were priest Marko and thirty two volunteers, but in time the celebrations became so massive, that the institution of the feast’s *kum* was needed.

This way, by use of the available means and elements known in the culture, the tradition was re-created. However, I treat the tradition, its revitalization or “invention” as Marcin Lubaś does, “We don’t treat the tradition (...) as an existing arrangement of conditions of certain parts of our social life or the life in total. The assumed (...) scope of study allows studying the tradition – the cultural content and forms intentionally fixed in social discourses and practices, but also the traditionalization - i.e. sometimes unsuccessful, often motivated by conflicted cultural visions, efforts to consolidate cultural forms and contents due to their assumed or actual antiquity” (Lubaś 2008: 11). Tradition, therefore, is a process consisting of both recreating and transforming existing folklore. Lubaś goes as far as claiming that “differentiation between actual (authentic) and artificial (invented) traditions is unnecessary. Tradition, in fact, is what is perceived as tradition by people.” (Lubaś 2008: 15).

The following part of the article contains description of the Easter celebrations as they are nowadays. I use present tense not to show continuity and unchangeability of the practices but to present its structure and complexity. It should be underlined, however, that the description presents the celebrations I took part in while collecting research materials in 2010-2014 (unless stated otherwise), and the most important observations were made in 2013.

The town starts the most important preparations on Maundy Thursday. That is when the hostesses and the eldest daughters prepare Easter eggs, dying the eggs red in most cases. There must be plenty of eggs – even a couple dozen, so there is enough to give to not only the family but also to neighbours, friends and church. This moment marks the beginning of a week-long process of the community exchanging eggs, what surely plays a social role and strenghtens the feeling of togetherness, following the well-known principle *Do ut des* (I give so you can give). The first three dyed (Mac. *vapcane*) eggs play a special role, the first is given to God, the second – to the host, the third – to Church. The God’s egg (Mac. *Gospodovo jajce*) is hung on a nearby tree. Children, but also adult volunteers, have their faces circled with a red egg to the words *crveno belo debelo* – a blessing and wishes, be red (rosy), white and thick, meaning healthy, alive and strong, well-fed.

Father Marko, the head priest of Makedonski Brod explains the egg’s symbolism:

*The meaning of ‘vapcanje’ – the egg symbolizes our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus suffered, was laid in tomb and resurrected on the third day, as the egg gives new life after three weeks, Jesus exit his tomb, resurrected and gave us new*

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<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from an interview with Marko Trpkoski, performed in 2013 in Makedonski Brod. Unabridged version can be found in the author’s archive.

*life. That is why the custom was preserved in the Christian world for over two thousand years and why it symbolizes the life of Jesus Christ and His resurrection<sup>17</sup>.*

I noticed that the studied community is fascinated with the Easter egg. Those given the egg do not treat this gesture merely as courtesy or reminiscence of an old pagan cult. It is a real *gift*, a treasure, expression of affinity, respect, closeness, the will to maintain relation. Easter eggs are to be admired, you should praise those, who gave it to you and answer with joy, gratitude and by giving them an egg as well.

Another vital element of the holiday is children visiting cathedral Orthodox church 'Sveta Bogorodica' (Holly Mother of God) in Makedonski Brod, called 'the main church'. Nursery teachers take the children to the church, where they are awaited by priests and church servants. The children have an opportunity to familiarize with the church, they learn bodily and ritual practices (making the sign of the cross, kissing icons, lighting candles, moving in the church). Priests give the children Easter eggs, crosses or prayer ropes. Father Marko explains the meaning of Easter in brief, simple words. I found his words to children (in 2013) very significant, *You are our joy, our future – of our town and motherland and The tradition must remain unbroken.*

Another step of group celebration is evening meeting in the church. Before the liturgy starts, around 7 p.m., after dark, people gather in front of the church, mostly teenagers. Schoolchildren and teenagers wait mainly for *podprška*, students have the chance to catch up on their friends' lives and the life of the town.

Father Marko, who looks favourably upon *podprška* and even places the custom in a religious framework, describes it as follows:

*Years ago the youth of our town created a new custom „podprška”. What is podprška – it is performed only in our town and has been passed on from generation to generation. Everyone comes to the church to light a candle and when they leave, specifically during the procession with the Cross taken from the altar and icon of Our Lord Jesus' crucifixion – then, in honour of the Passion of Christ, young people set a wisp of hair of their loved one on fire. If somebody has a crush - he walk up to girl and to prove their feelings he singes (podprža) her wisp to get her attention. This means that just like Jesus Christ suffered and gave his life for every Christian, for everyone in the world, they give their soul to the chosen person. This custom can be found only in our town.*

A young man gave me another interpretation of this custom:

*As kids, we used to do this for fun. We would throw matches and if we hit someone, they showed up in school the next day with burnt hair. It had nothing to do with having a crush on someone.*

Having experienced the holiday and having shown their feelings, affinity, or just childish games, some of the youth goes back home and some go to *kafici*, to enjoy the company over a beer, cognac or a non-alcoholic drink.

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<sup>17</sup> All conversations were in Macedonian. For the purposes of the article, I translated all the quotes. Complete materials can be found in my personal archive.

Holy Friday in Makedonski Bord is very quiet, as the events in the New Testament are and as the Church is filled with sadness. It is a day of Black Fast - those, who decided to fast gave up not only meat but all animal products or even decided not to eat anything until the night of Resurrection. Most often the Fast is taken in special intention (e.g. health, finding a job, marriage). Prohibition of work is also observed. This seems to be a common custom – Holy Friday is a bank holiday in Macedonia. The day is to be spent with family and friends.

The Friday matins is held on Thursday evening, after sunset. The priests celebrate Cyrillian *carski časovi* with performed ‘the rites of suffering’, which commemorate the suffering, death and burial of Christ. Around 8 p.m. the people of Brod again gather around the church. They light candles – for the living mainly, but also for the dead. People pray to the icons for help and protection from the saints. Along the iconostasis, at the icons, they leave plenty of gifts, brought here throughout the Holy Week. These signs of hope and appeals – pretty rich for those, who earn a hundred Euro per month or have been unemployed for months - oils, socks, shirts, cloths etc. are supposed to convince saints and God to listen to the prayers, push away the fears, save people from danger, keep them in good health or bring them back to health. These objects are auctioned in church on the third day of Easter and return – consecrated – to the community, although not to their original owners.

On Good Friday church becomes a place of death – symbolizing Golgotha and the grave. The faithful bow down to and kiss Epitaphios. Having said their prayers, they make the sign of the cross and the procession of people with lit candles, headed by priests carrying the Epitaphios, circles the church three times. This is how Orthodox Macedonians bury their God.

When the *burial* is finished, people go back home. During my studies, mostly people with children and the elderly did so, whereas youth went to the local disco. Although the Good Friday is deemed the saddest, the most serious day in the Church, the adults did not scrutinize the teenagers.. On the ‘saddest’ day of the Passion, teenagers focused mainly on the joy of holiday and on being together; they give each other best wishes (*za mnogu godini praznikot*) and enjoy their company.

Holy Saturday is even more calm. As father Marko says – *Christ rests in his tomb, let us rest too* (Mac. *Hristos miruva vo grobot i nie miruvame*). At night, around an hour before midnight, people gather around the church to celebrate the religious event. The church’s square fills up with families with children, teenagers, few elders. On this special night the faithful stay for the whole service (most often they just pray for a while and leave). People enter the church, light candles at iconostasis, decorated with gifts, they kiss the icons, come to the epitaphios to say goodbye, kiss it, leave red eggs, gifts etc. People move smoothly around a circle. Meanwhile, the priest prays at closed royal doors. He then opens the doors, censes shroud located in the centre of the church and carries it to the altar. The royal doors are again closed. Lights go out. On the sound of bells, marking midnight and resurrection, they are lit again. The Paschal Matins service begins. The priest sings *Your resurrection, Christ the Saviour, angels praise in heavens, make us worthy, praise You with pure heart*, and opens the iconostasis doors – „[doors] will stay open for the whole Holy Week as a sign that the resurrection of Christ gave the faithful way to His sacrifice and Resurrection” (Lijka 2008: 90). Then the procession starts. Lead by

the priest, it leaves the church and circles the building three times<sup>18</sup> (West to East). When the third circle is over, father Marko stops at the closed doors to the church. The faithful stand in a semicircle, like in an amphitheatre. The prayers continue, the officiant again sings the Paschal troparion and reads verses on the resurrection from the New Testament. The priest knocks on the doors three times with the cross and says, *Let the Tzar of the living come!* Zoran, the priest's assistant, sneaks into the church and asks, *Who is the tzar?* The priest answers that Jesus Christ is<sup>19</sup> and announces His Resurrection with the words *Hristos Voskrese!* People then answer *Vistina Voskrese!* This is repeated three times. The church doors are opened and the officiant again sings the troparion (in Macedonian and Church-Slavonic). The priest enters the church followed by people carrying lit candles. More prayers are sung, including ectenia, with the assistant singing *Lord, have mercy (Gospode pomiluj)*<sup>20</sup>. The faithful line up along the Southern wall, move toward the iconostasis and light candles, then pray at the Northern wall. The church servants hand out Easter eggs, which are either left (as a gift) at the altar – where they stood during the liturgy – at the now empty tomb or are taken home. When the ectenia is finished, the priest passes through the open royal doors with lit incense and censes the interior together with the faithful. Meanwhile, his assistant one more time sings *Christ has risen from the dead*, the song of the holiday, and other prayers. The rituals finish with priest repeating *Hristos Voskrese* three times, each time answered by *Vistina Voskrese!* The priest concludes the Paschal Matins with the holiday wishes *Za mnogu godini praznikot*.

On the Resurrection Sunday liturgy begins at 5 a.m. but it is attended by few people. More people can be found after 6:00 a.m. at cemeteries – in the town or nearby villages, depending on where they buried their dead. I decided to go to one of the villages, nowadays desolated (there are only two-three residents, not many more come back in summer to rest from the noise of Skopje). Every year the place is visited on Easter morning by those who had grown up here but left the village looking for better life or following their spouses; families whose father or grandparents grew up and were buried here. After individual prayers in the church, people visit the graves where they light candles, offer the souls of the dead some bread, something sweet, pour some rakija on the soil and leave a lit cigarette (if the buried was a smoker). Leaving an egg is a must<sup>21</sup>. An elderly woman from Makedonski Brod told me that in the past *every house had to slay a lamb*<sup>22</sup>, without

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<sup>18</sup> As Kazimierz Lijka says – Circling the church three times was known in Jerusalem as early as in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Proof can be found in Kanonarium of Jerusalem, which contains notes on the liturgy of the Easter Vigil in the Church of the Holu Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Lijka 2008: 90, footnote 9).

<sup>19</sup> This part is not mentioned in the description by Kazimierz Lijka. I have been told that it is unique for Makedonski Brod. Perhaps this element of religious performance is a result of the priest's creativity.

<sup>20</sup> Detailed description of canonical liturgy on Holy Saturday was enclosed in Lijka 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Food (including egg) is placed at the head of the deceased and later – when all the rituals are over – is taken from the tombstone. All that is left are a cigarette (if the deceased smoked) and lit candles.

<sup>22</sup> I use the (South-Slavic) word throughout the article in its transliterated version. Mac. *kolenje, koli* means to kill with a blade, in this case with a knife, although I agree with Magdalena Lubańska, that the word *to slay* is too brutal and unsuitable in the given context (Lubańska 2012: 103, footnote 20).

*fail!* In my opinion, nowadays the custom - *kurban* – no longer is ritual *kolenje*<sup>23</sup>. However, the custom of gossiping is alive and well. At some point, when the most important grave rituals are over, men separate from women. They gather in a circle on the side – the elderly, fathers but also twenty-somethings – taste *rakija* (only home-made), smoke, set some “facts” straight, talk about “how it is going”, about the countryside, politics, their problems and achievements; then they go back to their families. Women, meanwhile, talk as well, however without alcohol and tobacco<sup>24</sup>. The cemetery also witnesses a constant exchange of gifts For the souls of the dead, Let it be useful in God’s face<sup>25</sup>. After around two hours we go back to Brod for breakfast. There should be lamb on the table. When the breakfast is over, it is time for family.

The most joyful day of the celebrations is Easter Monday. This the day of the awaited *pokrsti* (procession with cross) and *sobir* (gathering) at the old church, as well as Brodian towers (*kuli*). During *pokrsti*, the procession circles the town and its fields along the surrounding hills. This procession is also known (during Easter and on St George’s day) in other parts of Macedonia (see Risteski 1993) and the Balkan Peninsula. People take part in them *za zdravje, srečja, beriket* (for health, happiness and well-being) and ask for protection from drought and earthquake. They circle their town every Easter, which can be understood as a prayer for protection but also drawing the borders of their immediate territory. This Easter „enchanting” the world with *pokrsti* begins in the morning, around 8:00 a.m. *pred glavната crkva*, that is the Mother of God’s cathedral. The procession, lead by priests carrying the Holy Bible, cross and icons, and with *bajrak* (banner) carried by a young boy, starts at the place called *Topola*. It is accompanied by the sounds of folk instruments, *tapan* (drum), *gajda* (bagpipes), *kaval* (woodwind instrument) and Orthodox songs. Elderly women told me that people used to sing ritual songs, e.g. for summoning rain. Nowadays even they cannot remember the lyrics.

As Brodians claim, *Topola* was the site of a church of Sveta Petka. Nowadays all that remains are foundation blocks. This is the place of first *wedging* (Mac. *zaklinuvanje*) of an oak. As father Marko explains:

*The wedging means that we make a cross with an axe, bark the wood and make a cavity in the center of the cross. Then we fill the cavity with proshpora (holiday bread) and pour some red wine. This custom symbolizes the resurrection of Christ. The cross stands for the cross on which Jesus died, the cavity symbolizes his tomb. As we know, the tomb was blocked with a stone, that is why we [also] block our cavity – with a wooden wedge. And as the oak comes to life in spring and gives new life, Christ rises from his tomb and gives new life.*

<sup>23</sup> As Lubańska repeats after Goran Blagoev, both Muslims and Orthodox give three meanings to the word *kurban*, it describes the ritual of sacrifice, the sacrificed animal and the meal made from the animal (Lubańska, 2012: 102). It is worth noting, that the Orthodox use also beans (it is then the so-called *fast kurban*).

<sup>24</sup> I have been told that when the village was still alive, the ceremony of gossip had a form of a feast at the old cemetery.

<sup>25</sup> More on ritual feasts, including those at cemeteries, can be found further in the article. See also, Van Gennep 2006: 53, 166; Vrazinovski, Wrocławski, Zadrożyńska 2002: 58).

The custom is performed in four places around town (in places called ‘Topola’, ‘at the old church’, at ‘saat’ and at ‘türbe’/‘sveti Nikola’). The procession starts at the main church and moves clockwise, West to North, then East and South, because *Christ would teach everywhere, His Gospels reached all parts of the world*. Before the procession reaches the smaller church and the grave of st Nicolas, it stops at the Makedonski Brod Commune Office. This place is also thought to be sacred, according to a legend, in the late 14th or at the beginning of the 15th century an Orthodox monastery was meant to be built here; a monastery that “they destroyed...”. Nowadays only a well (*bunar*) and remnants of graves can be found in this place.

In every one of the four ritual *locus* with a ritual oak, take place with ritual elements such as making the sign of the cross, *zaklinuvanje*, singing prayers, dancing around or near the tree<sup>26</sup>. If the oak grows close to a church, the priests first pray inside the building. After the tree has been debarked in the likeness of cross, one of the men uses a hand drill to make a cavity. The Brodians stand around the tree, with priests being closest to it, and sing of the Resurrection. When the cavity is ready, the priest makes the sign of the cross holding a piece of holiday bread and places the bread in the cavity. Then he pours wine in. This is repeated three times. During the process, the priest sings the Paschal troparion (in Macedonian and Church-Slavonic), *Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in tombs bestowing life* (Mac. *Hristos voskresna od mrtvite, so smrtta smrtta ja pobedi i na tie vo grobovite život im dade*). Then the cavity is sealed with a wedge and the priest makes the sign of the cross around him, blessing the faithful and chanting – *Christ is Risen!* The faithful answer – *Truly, He is Risen!* And the priest – *May He help us forever and ever*. Then the procession accompanied by music proceeds to the next ritual place.

One of the most important moments of *pokrsti* is *sobir* at the old church. The church is located on a hill North off Makedonski Brod. It is also home to *stari grobišta* – the old cemetery, however no-one remembers who was buried there. According to father Marko, the eldest graves can be from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The hill is surrounded by forest and a ritual tree can be found between the graves. Just as at other places, bread and wine are *wedged* into the tree to the sounds of sung prayers. Some Brodians wait for the procession at the spot. The priests first enter the church, then father Marko prays in front of the building over a table with food. Next, people eat the blessed food, prepared by the family appointed the role of *kums*. The *kum* (a man or a woman) and their family play the role of godparents of the holiday. During Easter, godparents for the next year are elected – most often three people. It seems that the elections in Brod have changed over the last decades. I learned from my interviews that at first the role was assigned to old Brodians, those who established the town. The honour was passed from generation to generation probably until Brod expanded and turned from village to town. One family was not able to prepare food for the whole population and the role was given to more families, nowadays three every year. With time, the function left the closed circle of the *old Brodians* – the families who prepared ritual bread (*pogača*) put a coin into the loaf. Nowadays, they put a coin into three sandwiches. Those, who find the lucky *sendvič* are given the honour next year. Moreover, should somebody feel the urge to be a godparent, they

<sup>26</sup> In 2011 *oro* was danced around the oak, in 2013 this element was left out. People danced on the nearby glade.

can volunteer. In my studies I was on the one hand told that everyone from Makedonski Brod (and even from out of town) can be a godparent, on the other hand people claimed that only the oldest houses can be granted this honour – they have to be one of the old settlers. The godparent's main role is preparing food for all the participants of *sobir*. Besides sandwiches and drinks, the godparents prepare lamb meat, divided between every participant. The priests are given, among other parts, the head (with brain, considered a delicacy there). People drink rakija, beer, water, exchange Easter eggs and bump them on one another to see which one is the strongest. The feasters repeat, *Hristos Voskrese, Vistina Voskrese, Vajstina Voskrese! Za mnogu godini praznikot!* The feast takes place in a glade next to the church with tombstones serving as tables and benches. After the meal and short rest everyone gathers around the oak, *gajda* and *tapan* play folk music and people dance *oro*, holding hands. The procession surrounds musicians and, as the sign of appreciation, leaves them money and eggs. I heard that this custom originates in times when the celebrations were accompanied by Turkish musicians (nowadays both musicians and participants – except for rare spectators – are Orthodox Macedonians) – the gift of Easter egg was a sign of respect and a source of joy<sup>27</sup>.

About an hour after the procession reaches the church, the priest and the musicians move on, followed by a joyful procession.

The richness of elements and symbolism of the celebrations – old church, lamb meat eaten at old graves, contamination grave-table-altar; old rule demanding the godparent be from an old Brod family, group prayer and singing, *oro* dancing around an old oak; exchanging eggs, the special day – all the acts can be interpreted as a ritual feast of Brodians with their ancestors and an amnesia of the past. Undoubtedly, the meaning of this reunion at the bones (symbolic or actual) of the ancestors and group celebrations is renewing the community – diachronic, vertical, through reaching the roots; and synchronic, horizontal, through gathering in one (sacred) place and time. This unification is not limited to its spiritual, sacred or physical side – renewing social bonds, confirmation that the people of Brod are still close together, are still members of the same community (the Macedonian nation, Christians, people of Poreche and of Brod), affirmed and strengthened, is also vital. Józef Obrębski, who studied Poreche in 1932-1933, wrote about religion as of a phenomenon which „enhances the creation of the group cohesiveness and integration of a village community”. The integrative function of eating a meal in a group was also described by Gerardus van der Leeuw (Leeuw 1997: 317) and Magdalena Zowczak (Zowczak 2005: 205-224).

The celebration peaks in the afternoon, at about 1:00-2:00 p.m. The procession returns to the main church from the church of St. Nicolas (the church *sveti Nikola*, being also *tekke* or *türbe* of Hadir Baba, Bektashi saint). It is joined by folk groups from all over Macedonia – young men and girls in regional outfits. The church is surrounded with tables and benches where people eat Easter lunch made by the godparents with some help from the Church (although not as lavish as the breakfast at the old church). Nowadays – officially – everyone can take part in the lunch but – as with the role of godparent – it not always was the case. Word has it that in the past only members of the old Brodian houses

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<sup>27</sup> Nowadays in Macedonia – according to one Bošnjak, my interlocutor – some hodjas try to strengthen the lack of trust in the less-educated Muslims by saying that the egg is some sort of black magic, which brings unfortune on those who accept the gift.

could take part in the gathering in front of the church. As one elderly woman told me, this social border still exists – even though she had been living in Makedonski Brod for over 40 years, since she married a local man, she still cannot take part in this *sobir*, as she still does not feel treated as *their own*<sup>28</sup>.

*After the lunch and some rest, the church's square is a place of play/custom (igra/adet<sup>29</sup>) kalenčica* – it is performed by teenage girls clothed in traditional outfits, and the rest watch.

The peak of the celebration is making *towers (kuli)* of people. It is a unique game, called *custom* by the Brodians. Young people of Poreche, only boys and bachelors (although I have heard that everyone can take part in *kuli*, mostly the above mentioned groups do), stand in circles, a couple of men in each. They grab each other by the shoulders and are climbed on by another group, making a “tower” (*kula*), two “storeys” high. *Kuli* move in the company of a couple of thousands people to *sredselo*. The game ends there, but it is not the end to celebration. The procession is accompanied by songs – as I was told by the elder women, in the 1980s people would sing Easter traditional songs, whereas when I participated in the celebrations, people sang a well-known Macedonian song from early 1990s – *Na Veligden sum se zaljubil* (I fell in love on Easter). When the celebration ends, people gathered in *sredselo*, both those from the *old Brod* and those who settled here later, young dancers (*igraorci*) from various parts of Macedonia (or even Serbia) – dance traditional circle dances to the sounds of *gajda* and drum. Those, who do not dance, surround the *actors* and watch them, happy to be a part of this performance, resembling social ritual in which „the performers and listeners are the same people” (Leach, Greimas 1989: 56).

According to old tales *kuli* originate in the times when the land was a part of the Ottoman Empire and the official religion was Islam. The people of Makedonski Brod say that they wanted to be faithful to *their* creed and practice Christian holidays:

*Brodians gathered gold and went to Constantinople, to the Sublime Porte and begged that they can celebrate one day in a year. The Sultan let them choose one day to celebrate freely and they chose Easter as the most important Christian holiday. They thought that they beat the Ottomans. That is why Turks are at the bottom and we, Macedonians, are on the top of the tower.*

This is how Brodians *bought a holiday* – they were granted a right to celebrate Christian holiday and they thought they outsmarted the Turks, the Muslims. I have heard this legend many times from Brodians, and father Marko is among those, who spread this

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<sup>28</sup> The division into *old Brodians* and *došlaks* can be seen in the pattern of the graves – the former are buried closer to the centre and the entrance, the latter – in the outer parts. This type of division seems to be a tradition in Poreche, it was noticed by Obrębski, who wrote, “The cemetery is in some way a reflection of the internal division of the village – locations of the graves reflect the system of lineage, sublineage and houses” – (Obrębski 1972: 203).

<sup>29</sup> The term *adet* came from Arabian language, from which it was in turn taken by Ottoman Turks. The context in which the word appears in Macedonia, the meaning of *adet* is close to *custom, tradition*. Obrębski defines it as “special privileges given to the first man by God in the mythical cosmogonic time and passed on by the ancestors from generation to the current generation. Just like an order, adets are unchangeable and cannot be initiated freely” (Obrębski, typing, after, Lubańska 2012: 99, footnote 1).

legend the most. As he claims, his studies prove that *kuli* have been performed year after year on the second day of Easter for five hundred years:

*“Towers” is a truly beautiful custom established in the times of Ottoman rule when our Orthodox nation [in the original, naš pravoslaven narod] was enslaved. When Brodians bought it – this one day, the greatest Christian holiday, Easter – with gold, so they could be able to freely celebrate, to feel greater, happier – they invented “Towers”. This means that the “Towers” were not invented today but they come from early 15th century<sup>30</sup>.*

The legend has it that this custom has been practised for centuries, whatever the political situation was. It is unlike the procession around town, which in the communist era circled only the church (the church officially remained closed, the contemporary priest worked in a clinic, and the church grounds were used to raise animals). It was father Marko’s initiative to *reinstate the tradition* of Easter procession around the town. He was, as he says himself, to find a brochure in his archives describing an Easter *litja* around the neighbouring hills (date on the document read 1912). Another person told me that father Marko found old books in the river (books on old ways of Easter celebration in Brod), which had been thrown out by his late predecessor<sup>31</sup>. Having found notes on the procession, the priest and a group of men decided to reinstate the old custom. Commune Office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs received a request for permission for public procession. The first (*reactivated*) *pokrsti* took place on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1991. A week before, father Marko asked the eldest man of Brod, Milovoj Dabeski, to help him set the route around Brod and find sacred places. During the first *voskresuvanje* (as the priest called it) of the *wedging* custom, the gathered people signed a Holy Bible. They counted thirty-three people, what was significant and not accidental, as “the number 33 is sacred – at the age of 33 Jesus Christ gave his life for all the Christians”.

Performing *towers* and the end of music in *sredselo* (the old village forum) conclude the celebrations of the Resurrection of Christ in Makedonski Brod. Formally, they end a day later, on the third day of Easter, called *Mal Veligden*. On that day a church auction takes place in Brod and in the nearby village of Mogilec *slava* in the church *Voskresenie Hristovo* (Resurrection of Jesus)

## Conclusions

Numerous practices performed by the people of Makedonski Brod in the Paschal period, including frequent and intense meetings – going to church, taking part in liturgy,

<sup>30</sup> In this type of tale, locating the events in a certain time is not the most important thing (although a certain historical context adds credibility); the most important is giving it the status of antiquity.

<sup>31</sup> I do realize this seems like a legend („mysterious book” found „at the source, origin”) and adds mystery to the tale as well as forges a relation to another dimension of time and space. In fact, it could *actually* happen – I myself have been given Yugoslavian books, which were hidden at the Treska river and found there. If we want to treat the people whose culture we study as partners and the cognition process is to be a dialogue and be based on cooperation, we should at least consider both versions believable.

prayers in Macedonian (*own*) and Church-Slavonic (*old* and *sacred* language<sup>32</sup>), participating in „God’s funeral” and the glory of his Resurrection, repeating and passing on the sign of the cross (what is a part of catechization), as well as, mutual circling the church and town, feasting, dancing, narrations of the past, exchanging gifts and blessings – without a doubt recreate and strengthen the community and – are an element of Macedonian religious culture and means of transferring the lore of the community’s past. This lore is enhanced, created and chosen according to the situation. A holiday, after all, may play a crucial role not only in transmitting tradition and identity, but also be an opportunity to consider own religious, local, national, cultural identity; may revitalize and sometimes reorganize those identities.

What do people from Makedonski Brod consider *own* and what is *foreign*? Where do they draw a line? The abovementioned practices prove that the most important elements, with which Brodians identify, are, apart from *our territory*, *Macedonian identity* and *Christianity*. The later concept conveys not only religion but also its connection to nationality (with being a Macedonian)<sup>33</sup>. I have often heard phrases like, *we*, „*risjani*” (*hris-tijani* - Christians), *our Orthodox people/nation*, *our Macedonian religion*. In the local scale it is the so-called folk religiousness, folk Orthodoxy. You can also hear that *Macedonia is the Biblical land*, and apocrypha say that *Mother of God walked this land*. On the foreign side we can find *turska vera* (literally, Turkish religion, with meaning - Islam), *druga* (other) *vera* and the representatives of this faith, *turci* (with meaning, Muslims), nowadays mostly Albanians whose presence is often stressed by Orthodox Macedonians (but also the foreignness, or at least ambivalence, of Macedonian-speaking Muslims – the Torbesh). I have often heard the opinion that Makedonski Brod is *purely Macedonian*, i.e. the town is populated only with Orthodox Macedonians. It was mostly true, although the situation has been changing over the last decade. More specifically, Brod and other towns in Macedonia see the rise in number of Albanian women – coming here due to arranged marriages with Macedonian bachelors. As I established, there were 68 of them in Makedonski Brod Commune in 2013. The official data say that they came to Macedonia in consequence of the actions of local officials aimed at improving the birth rate in desolated communes<sup>34</sup> (the commune I studied gained almost two hundred children). Macedonians from Brod say about the women that they are Albanian Catholics, therefore their brothers are not from Kosovo or Macedonia – an important fact, taking into consideration that these Albanian groups are perceived by Macedonians as a threat (mostly due to the conflict of 2001). They are afraid that Poreche will be Albanized and islamized – During my studies I could hear people from nearby villages say quiet, „Poreche is over”, „they got here”, „they are going to devour us”. The process of Macedonians leaving their homes and the connected Albanization are proceeding in the West Macedonia - in Tetovo, Gostivar and the nearby Kičevo. For the quiet and calm people of Poreche, resistant to changes and closed to *otherness* – a similar situation would bring a change in their every-

<sup>32</sup> It’s also important and significant that Church-Slavonic has common history with Old Macedonian (and Old Bulgarian) language.

<sup>33</sup> More on the relations between the state, nation, Church and religion in the context of the Balkans and Macedonia can be found in Risteski 2009: 144-188.

<sup>34</sup> After I had finished my studies, I found out that the mayor plans on organizing another meeting of local old bachelors with women from Russia, Ukraine and Albania.

day life, therefore they are afraid that Poreche is no longer *their region, their little homeland, home*, and became foreign or taken from them – they are afraid that it will become a place where people speak an incomprehensible language or follow a different religion<sup>35</sup>, where there are other customs, clothes, music. Those are also elements of the Macedonian identity<sup>36</sup> (customs, clothes, music, language) – however, when it comes to local identity, dialects are more important than the literary language. In Poreche it is a dialect called *Porečki* (Porechian), being a part of West Macedonian central dialects (see Марковиќ 2001), close to the literary language.

Referring to Geertz's religious studies – the described symbolic practices, based on religious culture and is considered a part of tradition, including the tales of the past, prayers, songs, rituals, customs, folk games repeated every year by the Macedonians of Makedonski Brod in Poreche are – perhaps, most of all – the engagement of a community into preserving their identity and territory, and into maintaining *order* (of own) *cosmos* and the order of everyday life (Geertz 1992: 502).

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<sup>35</sup> For the Orthodox Macedonians, Islam becomes a more and more *foreign* and dangerous religion, as the country witnesses the rise in numbers of radical „fighting” Muslims – what in turn is more of a geo-political procedure (and economical – propagators of the movement come to villages in Macedonia and persuade the local hodjas and villagers to join the movement and to symbolically express their endorsement by growing a beard or wearing a niqab or burqa. They are offered money in exchange – I personally heard about 200 EUR).

<sup>36</sup> The people of Poreche also define themselves as *Brsjaks*, a name relating to Slavonic tribal people once living in the area (ethnology defines *Brsjaks* as an ethnic group). Nowadays in their tales, *Brsjaks* always are opposed to *Mijaks* – another (Macedonian, Slavonic) ethnic group. Both identities, however, have almost vanished.

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