Ana Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska (North Macedonia)
Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology
Faculty of Science and Mathematics
"St. Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje
e-mail:ashtalkovska@gmail.com
orchid: 0000-0002-4219-2800

MACEDONIAN ETHNOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF WOMEN: A SELF-CRITICAL REEXAMINATION OF CONCEPTUAL CONTRADICTIONS

Abstract: This paper offers an overview of research that may be defined as the ethnology and anthropology of women within the Macedonian context. It discusses the perspectives of several authors—including my own—who, in studying the status of women in traditional communities, have employed the model of the imagined and the real order. Finally, through a self-reflexive critique, the paper highlights conceptual contradictions and the challenges surrounding the representation of women in Macedonian ethnology and anthropology.

Keywords: imagined and real model, female subculture, rituality, witchcraft, patriarchy

Introduction

"When in your life were you happiest? Where do you go when your soul feels heavy? Do you dream often?"—these are among the questions that Jelena Cvetanovska poses to women in her 2005 film Women's Stories. In it, older women from various villages across Macedonia are given the opportunity to reflect on questions about their lives—questions that, until then, had rarely, if ever, been asked by ethnologists.

The anthropology of women emerged in the 1970s within Western academia as both a reaction to and critique of the inadequate treatment of women in social anthropology. At the same time, it formed part of a broader re-evaluation within the social sciences, which had long neglected the social construction of gender or had approached it through essentialist notions of the "eternal" characteristics of the sexes (Papić, Sklevicky 2003: 10). The anthropology of women is understood as the initial phase in the development of feminist anthropology. Its primary aims were to reassess representations of women in earlier ethnographies, to use new research to document what women actually do, and to record and analyze women's own narratives, attitudes, and perspectives (Škorić 2001: 7). From this early stage onward, the relationship between anthropology and women evolved through several key concepts and critiques that built upon one another: first through the introduction of the category of gender; then through the rejection of universalist

interpretations of women's positions that derived from Western epistemology and thus carried ethnocentric assumptions; and later through the recognition of differences among women, incorporating diverse and intersecting identities that must be examined contextually. (For the history and transformation of these approaches, see Papić & Sklevicky 2003; Škorić 2001: 5–20; Baćević 2012: 434–445; Silverstein & Lewin 2016: 6–37; Lamphere 2016: 41–64.)

In Macedonian ethnology and anthropology, the most distinctive and productive phase corresponds to this first stage—when several researchers began to reexamine representations of women in earlier ethnographies. They did so both through critical reinterpretations of works by earlier authors—who had mentioned women only incidentally while studying traditional culture—and through their own fieldwork that explicitly centered women and their interpretations of their own lives. The goal of these studies was to verify and, ultimately, to transform the prevailing image of women in traditional Macedonian culture in light of new research perspectives.

Interest in Women throughout the History of the Disciplines in Macedonia

Ethnology and anthropology in Macedonia are relatively young disciplines, whose development has been shaped by the long absence of academic programs during the socialist period[1]. This absence produced far-reaching consequences that are still evident today—first, in the lack of adequately trained specialists, and second, in the delay in aligning local scholarship with contemporary theoretical and methodological developments elsewhere. As a result, the shift toward women as a focus of ethnological and anthropological research in Macedonia did not occur until the early 2000s.

During this formative period, the small community of ethnologists remained primarily interested in traditional rural culture. However, by the late 1990s, gradual changes in research interests had begun to appear among professors and students of the then Department of Ethnology within the Institute of Geography at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics. Alongside encouragement from certain professors who urged students to explore "urban and contemporary topics" as legitimate research fields, there also emerged a wave of critical rereadings of earlier interpretations of traditional rural culture. These earlier interpretations often relied on descriptive reconstructions of the traditional past imbued with a degree of romanticization, grounded almost entirely in an imagined model of the community under study—one that prescribed the desired or

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1   After the establishment of the People's Republic of Macedonia within the framework of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1946, the Seminar for Ethnology and Ethnography was founded under the leadership of Prof. Branislav Rusikj at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. Only a few years later, in 1952/53, the seminar was abolished, resulting in a significant gap in the education and training of new professionals until the establishment of the Department of Ethnology within the Institute of Geography at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, in the 1980s (see more, for example, in Risteski and Dimova 2013). The Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology was established as an independent unit within the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics in 2005. Because of this specific historical development of these disciplines in Macedonia, traditional approaches in research persisted for a longer period.

ideal version of every aspect of life. Consequently, representations of Macedonian rural communities—especially their social life—tended to depict them as "ideal communities," with little room for deviation from the moral and behavioral norms of the imagined model. These representations were first challenged through fieldwork conducted by the Department of Ethnology during the 1990s. Organized with notable commitment by some of the members of the teaching staff, these field studies were of relatively high quality and revealed that what was recorded in older ethnographies often failed to correspond with what people were actually willing to share in the field—especially regarding deviations from or transgressions of the imagined norms. Women thus became an especially effective focal point for illustrating this discrepancy—and consequently, they finally became visible within ethnological and anthropological research[2]. In this regard, the article by Prof. Aneta Svetieva, "The Status of the Woman in the Macedonian Traditional Village Community and Family" (Svetieva 2001a: 26–42), proved highly influential. In it, Svetieva draws upon the concept introduced in Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin's seminal book, "The Structure of Traditional Thought" (Rihtman-Auguštin 1984), which explores the mechanisms of the female subculture and tests the discrepancy between the publicly promoted ideal model of traditional culture and the real one (Jakimovska 2014: 114–115). This conceptual framework became the foundation upon which nearly all subsequent ethnological and anthropological research on women in traditional rural communities in Macedonia was built.

Women in the Concept of the "Ideal and Real Order"[3]

In "The Structure of Traditional Thought", Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin identifies the gap between the structure of thought and objective reality—between lived experience and the normative framework of what is prescribed, valued, and imagined. In everyday life, she argues, there exists a constant tension between these two orders: the imagined and the real (Rihtman-Auguštin 1984: 13, 15). This conceptual model became a central analytical tool for Macedonian ethnology and anthropology of women[4].

Earlier ethnographic literature on rural communities in Macedonia, dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily reflected the imagined model—guided by prescriptive notions of how people ought to behave. As a result, these works often convey the impression that norms and values were universally internalized and strictly followed. Such representations project a romanticized image of the traditional past (Rihtman-

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2   In the very first issue of the journal EthnoAnthropoZoom, published by the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, three articles were dedicated to women in the traditional rural community. In addition to the influential article by Prof. Dr. Aneta Svetieva, two student research papers were also published: "The Woman in the Family and Public Life – in the example of the village of Melnica" (Crvenkovska 2001: 240–247) and "The Barren Woman and the Attitude of the Traditional Village Community Towards Her (Autobiographical Narratives from the Villages of Oreshe, Teovo, Veles Region, and Ilovica, Strumica Region)" (Ashtalkovska 2001: 249–269). Although both are essentially descriptive in nature, they nonetheless reflect a shift in focus toward the study of women—a topic that, during this period, began to attract the interest of students as well.

3   The terms "ideal and real order" are widely used by researchers working on this topic; however, throughout this text, the terms "imagined and actual model" are used for the same conceptual framework, as I believe they resonate more closely with the idea of Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin.

4   In Croatian anthropology, interest in women emerged earlier, already in the 1980s.

Auguštin 1984: 58), presenting tradition — and, accordingly, the past — as an ideal foundation for the future. Consequently, topics that fell outside the moral and behavioral codes of the imagined model—those deemed "indecent," "shameful," or "improper"— were excluded from analysis (Jakimovska 2009: 14–18). Yet it is precisely within such transgressive domains that the tension between the imagined and the real becomes most visible, often with women as central figures (for example in relation to sexuality, the body, sin and punishment, or the so-called "female sin"[5]).

Beyond the context of deviation, the status of women in traditional communities has been explored primarily in the works of Aneta Svetieva and Ljupcho Risteski. Drawing on Rihtman-Auguštin, Svetieva's article "The Status of the Woman in the Macedonian Traditional Village Community and Family" examines mechanisms of female subculture through which women exercised latent rights emphasizing examples of mother-based extended families, as well as mechanisms of female subculture within the so-called father/brother-based extended families —including matters of inheritance, property division, and authority (Svetieva 2001a: 26–42). Her main thesis is that, within the family structure at the existential level, the position of women was not as unfavorable as sometimes portrayed. In practice, there are very few cases where, within family relations, the male group had a significantly more important position than the female one (Svetieva 2002: 115–124). Similarly, Ljupcho Risteski emphasizes the central role of women in the ritual life of traditional communities—within both familial and collective contexts. He argues that "female rituality is not a substitute or compensation for a traumatic condition of women in patriarchal society, but a complementary, essential, and harmonizing segment of traditional culture and community, which in contemporary ethnological studies is still labeled as patriarchal" (Risteski 2002: 113). According to Risteski, bajachki (folk healers and charmers), as women holding a monopoly over practices essential to communal health, consequently attained high social status (Risteski 2002: 119–20). Ilina Jakimovska, in "The Body: An Ethnological-Anthropological Study", analyzes gender regulation and the male/female body as well as the formation of gender identity within traditional culture through the same conceptual framework: "I wish to highlight the two aspects of the process of creating identity — one guided by the principles of an ideal, official culture that seeks to produce people with clearly defined, fixed identities (and thus belongs to the domain of the manifest and desired 'objective'), and the other, which

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5   Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska, Ana. 2021. Predbrachni seksualni odnosi vo narodnata kultura na Poreche – tabu tema i realna sostojba. Vo: Etnoloshko i kulturnoantropoloshko prouchuvanje na Poreche, urednici Ljupcho S. Risteski, Aneta Svetieva, Skopje, CEIPA (281–353)(In Macedonian Cyrillic). It is, in fact, an undergraduate thesis defended in 2002, and two additional papers on the same topic emerged from this research. (Ashtalkovska 2006 and 2002). Jakimovska Ilina, 2009. Teloto, etnoloshko-antropoloshka studija. Skopje, Slovo; Jakimovska, Ilina. 2015 (In Macedonian Cyrillic). 50 nijansi merak: atipichni seksualni odnesuvanja vo makedonskite mitovi i vo folklorot. Zbornik od konferencija „Za ljubovta",Zdruzhenie za komparativna knizhevnost na Makedonija i Zdruzhenie na klasichni filolozi „Antika", (179-187) (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Cvetanovska, Jelena. 2012. Grevot i kaznata. Skopje, Matica (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Cvetanovska, Jelena. 2001. Narodni kazni za zhenskite grevovi. Makedonski folklor, Spisanie na Institut za folklor „Marko Cepenkov", Godina XXIX, Broj 58-59, Skopje (547-558) (In Macedonian Cyrillic).

is latent, subjective — a 'shadow' discourse beneath which real people and their actual social power reside" (Jakimovska 2009: 80)[6].

The aim here is not to exhaustively survey all scholars who have applied this conceptual model, but rather to outline the general interpretive orientation adopted in reassessing women's positions in traditional rural communities. When I later refer to our research, I refer to these authors[7]—including myself—who work within the framework of the imagined and real order in examining representations of women.

In supporting these reassessments, our studies often cite two earlier researchers whose work displayed an unusual sensitivity to gender issues for their time. Both were male ethnographers who refused to idealize the traditional past and were among the first to address women's experiences directly. The first, Milenko Filipović, in his article "Women as Village Elders among Some Balkan Peoples" (Filipović 1991: 109–133), documents cases of female village elders, primarily in Macedonia. This evidence is frequently invoked to illustrate contradictions within ethnological representations of women: while women are typically portrayed as submissive and subordinate to men, the same social context allowed them to act as community leaders. In our interpretations, the former reflects the imagined model, while the latter—of conditional authority—corresponds to the real one. The second frequently cited figure is Józef Obrębski, who conducted fieldwork in the Poreče region in the 1930s. Like Filipović, he paid close attention to women's everyday lives, addressing taboo subjects such as abortion, illegitimacy, adultery, divorce, sexual relations, puberty, and marital incompatibility. In addition to these, Obrębski also devoted considerable attention to ritual life, a distinctly feminine domain. Alongside rituals meant to secure family and communal well-being, he also explored witchcraft, another exclusively female practice but one with a strongly negative and individualistic charge. In our interpretations, Obrębski's work demonstrates both the central position of women in domains crucial to community welfare and their power to influence others' lives through magic as a potentially dangerous female practice (see Обрембски 2001a, 2001b, 2002).

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6   During this period, gender was introduced as an important analytical category in some studies, particularly in relation to the traditional context of the formation of male and female identities (Jakimovska: 2009), but also in contemporary contexts that address topics such as sexuality, biological sex, and gender (Crvenkovska Risteska 2020; Crvenkovska Risteska 2013).

7   This group also includes several other topics: Svetieva, Aneta. 2003. Zhenski seniorat i pratechki pojavi vo tradiciskata kultura na Makedoncite. EtnoAntropoZum br. 3, Skopje, IEA (120-134) (In Macedonian Cyrillic). Svetieva, Aneta. 2003. Female Senioriy Principle and Accompanying Elements in the Traditional Culture of Macedonians. EthnoAnthropoZoom, Skopje IEA (120-135) and Svetieva, Aneta. 2001b. Tranzicija na „terlik". Makedonski folklor, Br. 58-59, God. XXIX, Skopje: Institut za folklor „Marko Cepenkov" (187-192) (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Jakimovska, Ilina/Jakimovska Ilina. 2017. "If You Are a Girl, Stay At Home" - Ethnographic Examination of Female Social Engagement from the Rural 19th Century to Contemporary Political Protests in Macedonia. Philosophy and Society 28 (1) (41-50) and Jakimovska, Ilina. 2016. Streite shto plachat: kako eden rodov stereotip mozhe da se iskoristi za negovo urivanje od vnatre. Vo: Muzej na zhenski prikazni, Urednici Geshoska Iskra, Kachakova Violeta, Tanurovska-Kjulavkovski Biljana, Skopje, Lokomotiva (75-81) (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Cvetanovska Jelena. 2015. Zhenata vo antropoloshkiot film. EtnoAntropoZum br. 12, Skopje, IEA (72-94) (In Macedonian Cyrillic). Cvetanovska, Jelena. 2015. Women in Anthropological Film. EthnoAnthropoZoom 15, Skopje, IEA (72-94).

Both Filipović and Obrębski were exceptionally perceptive researchers who penetrated deeply into the hidden realities of the communities they studied.

It is important to recall how these foundational authors—frequently cited within Macedonian ethnology and anthropology of women—understood their own conceptual frameworks. Rihtman-Auguštin explicitly warns against replacing one binary with another: "I think it would be entirely misguided if the final conclusion of this text were to propose a new model that, for instance, insisted on female subculture instead of patriarchal authority, or on conflict instead of harmony within the extended family community" (Rihtman-Auguštin 1976: 291, cited in Rihtman-Auguštin 1984: 182). Milenko Filipović, in his article on female village elders, calls for more extensive research on women's status in the Balkans, given the lack of such studies, in order to better understand both popular conceptions and lived realities. He notes that nowhere in the Balkans, throughout recorded history, have women been permanently chosen as village elders. Such situations were conditioned by specific circumstances — women typically ruled temporarily and on behalf of an underage or incapacitated elder, as in the extended family structure. In other words, these were not elective but situational positions — cases of "necessity," when no men were available or when women were expected to perform the duty more successfully. Thus, "the position of these women within the household and in society at large did not fundamentally change." Only under exceptional circumstances did women become leaders in a society where men normally governed (Filipović 1991: 130–132). Józef Obrębski also observed the gap between the imagined and real models, especially in the context of rituality and witchcraft — domains dominated by women, in contrast to their position within the patriarchal family and village. He wrote that while the secular community tends toward male authority, the religious community is egalitarian and inclusive (Obrembski 2001b: 59). He found the dominance of women in ritual life striking, given their subordinate social status, which he examined through the lens of patrilineality and patriarchy. According to Obrębski, women's connection to both witchcraft and ritual is consistent with the model of ritual obligations, where women have a leading role but simultaneously occupy a lower social position within the family and the village. Although this suggests a certain balance, he constantly emphasized the sharp distinction between the positions of men and women in the patrilineal system, in which "the social inferiority of women is a fundamental element of this culture" (Obrembski 2001b: 58–59).

All three authors—Rihtman-Auguštin, Filipović, and Obrębski—expose the contradictions between the imagined and the actual, yet avoid privileging one over the other. Their work demonstrates that this conceptual model achieves its analytical depth only when approached with nuance—when it is used not to resolve but to reveal the complex, layered realities of gender in traditional culture.

Problems of Representing Women in Our Research

An important indicator of the maturity of disciplines in terms of their capacity for generalization in this context is the representation of women in the singular. In both

Macedonian folklore studies and ethnology, a long-standing tendency has been to frame research topics within the context of a so-called ethnic culture. As a result, especially in earlier literature, one frequently encounters references to the Macedonian woman. A study of folkloristic portrayals of "the Macedonian woman" during the socialist period distinguishes three recurrent archetypes, as they appear in the journal Macedonian Folklore: the heroic woman of the revolutionary past, the victim of patriarchy, and the emancipated woman. The heroic woman is depicted as the pillar of national culture—guardian of traditions, customs, language, and consciousness, as well as the moral mother who gives birth to national fighters. The victim of patriarchy, by contrast, appears as a slave or sexual object, humiliated by patriarchal family authorities (both male and female). The emancipated woman embodies resistance—toward men and other (political) adversaries—and finally emerges as an equal subject within the family and society under socialism (Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska 2019: 135–144). Yet even this rigid triad of idealized types fails to hide the full range of women's social roles—mother, daughter, bride, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, co-sister, and so forth—each of which could simultaneously embody heroism, subordination, victimization, and emancipation. In Macedonian ethnology, Svetieva practically illustrates this problem with the concept of "one woman" in the traditional past. Although the title of her article–"The Status of the Woman in the Macedonian Traditional Village Community and Family"—appears to refer to a generalized, singular subject, her analysis actually reveals multiple, stratified female positions within the family: the woman in charge of women's work, daughters, daughters-in-law, co-wives, second wives, widows, unmarried daughters, and older unmarried women (Svetieva 2001a: 26–42). She further introduces the hierarchy of age as a decisive factor shaping women's status over the life course, alongside situational factors linked to the (mis)fortunes of individual families. Thus, from the outset, the notion of a "typical" woman in the traditional past was critically destabilized.

Working within the "for and against" framework—or more precisely, the dichotomy of the imagined and real models—our research on women constructs a direct opposition between representations of women as they should be according to community ideals, and representations of women as they are in everyday life.

Jelena Cvetanovska succinctly outlines the prescriptive rules of the imagined model governing male–female relations within the family and village, revealing the hierarchies that privilege men and subordinate women (Cvetanovska 2014: 130–132). These correspond to the patriarchal organization of traditional communities. Yet what proves more analytically fruitful are the arguments derived from the real model, which foreground women's agency and complex positioning—arguments consistently emphasized by researchers who employ the imagined/real, ideal/actual, or manifest/latent distinctions when examining women's status in traditional society.

Women's ritual practices, for example, are often interpreted as a key domain revealing women's vital social role within traditional communities—one that harmonizes gender relations, counterbalances male dominance, and mitigates women's subordination in familial and communal contexts. However, rituality can also be read as a stereotypically feminine trait—indeed, as an essentialized "female nature" or "female essence"—associated with caring for the well-being of others, the family, and the village as a whole.

Within the framework of the real model, the most compelling representations of women are those that focus exclusively on female agency. These include depictions of women's everyday resistance through mechanisms of the female subculture, on the one hand, and of their potentially destructive power through practices such as witchcraft, on the other.

Aneta Svetieva discusses the mechanisms of female subculture within the family through which women acquired—or rather, appropriated—a range of rights that, as she notes, were far from insignificant. Yet the descriptions of these rights reveal the subversive nature of their acquisition, as they were neither recognized nor sanctioned by the formal system as legitimate women's rights- that is, they were *illegal*. Hence, they are characterized as *latent*, *hidden*, and *forbidden*—secured through alternative means typical of the female subculture. "Theft, lies, duplicity, and female rituality as a source of power and protection" are among the tactics through which women maintained themselves within extended families (Svetieva 2001a: 33, 35). In a similar vein, Jelena Cvetanovska portrays the *cunning woman* whose greatest strength lies in her strategic use of language. She exercises diplomacy within the family to achieve her goals. The *female language* is also used for control within the broader community through *gossip*, a mechanism of the female subculture through which women exercise influence in the village community and exert pressure by shaping public opinion. This is *women's gossip* (Цветановска 2014: 135) which is indeed treated among interlocutors as a typical female form of communication in the traditional rural community. Or, as Risteski calls it, the **"women's court"**—a vital element of the female subculture that constructs and deconstructs communal myths as circumstances demand (Risteski 2002: 105).

Alongside these everyday tactics and strategies for gaining *forbidden rights*, women are also attributed with more dangerous practices aimed at harming others. Like rituality, witchcraft concerns both men and women, yet differs in intention and effect. According to Obrębski, its association with women derives from their lower social status within the family and village. However, witches are exceptional figures endowed with immense power, inspiring both fear and reverence; thus, witchcraft becomes classified as a quintessentially "*female sin*" (Cvetanovska 2014: 129, 137).

A Self-Reflexive Critique

Having gained some insight into the general atmosphere of ethnological and anthropological research during the period when women became the focus of inquiry, it seems only appropriate to critically examine my own role in this story—particularly because my earlier writings most directly, and perhaps most radically, embodied the very position I now seek to reconsider from a different perspective.

A defining feature of my early research was the use of a conceptual framework in which the imagined and the real models were set in opposition, in line with the dominant methodological trends of that time. My undergraduate thesis, "Premarital Sexual Relations

in the Folk Culture of Poreche: A Taboo Topic and a Real Condition"[8] (defended in 2002), already revealed this approach in its very title. Although the goal of that study was to document the discrepancies between the "ideal" and the "real order" of premarital sexual relations—particularly with regard to young women—in an effort to avoid one-sided interpretations, the analysis ultimately paid greater attention to the so-called "real order." This focus emphasized deviations and transgressions, that is, behaviors that fell outside socially established norms. Thus, in discussing the position of unmarried women in traditional village communities—where female sexuality was strictly controlled—"reality" was represented through examples of "fallen girls," "dishonored women," "whores," and other stigmatized figures. The categories used to illustrate this "for and against" model included sexual education, male–female communication, rules of conduct, and morality. The text itself cautions that such oppositions do not imply an argument for the equality of these categories within the traditional community; rather, they aimed to revise the idealized and romanticized image of the traditional past. Nevertheless, these interpretations once again produced an idealized version of "reality" in the traditional community. Given the relativity of terms such as "real condition" or "real order," such claims seem even more ambitious than the discipline's actual capacity to uncover "reality" as presented in the research. Although research based on oppositional models inevitably risks overlooking contextual nuance, this tendency was especially visible in studies of women in traditional societies. Data were often extracted from their broader social contexts and simplified into isolated theses meant to emphasize women's significance and agency in traditional rural life—contrary to dominant patriarchal interpretations. Yet, in this case, the initial intention to challenge generalizations about women's subordination in traditional society ultimately produced new generalizations in the opposite direction.

The academic discourse framing the roles and statuses of women in traditional rural communities—by opposing them to the imagined model—thus stood in direct contrast to the patriarchal framework itself. From this standpoint, the patriarchal model could no longer serve as an analytical foundation for understanding women's positions in traditional communities. Although all the markers of patriarchy were present in these studies, they were used primarily in order to be refuted. As a result, the patriarchal concept within the Macedonian traditional community came to be identified merely as a stereotype. This is stated explicitly in my article "Patriarchy Is to be Blamed for Everything" (Ashtalkovska 2005: 170–187). From today's perspective, I regard that text as problematic, as it reflects the very contradictions inherent in the ethnology and anthropology of women in the Macedonian context—contradictions I now seek to critically examine. At the time, there was already a shared understanding among scholars working in this field that the term patriarchy did not accurately reflect the "reality" of women's positions in traditional rural

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8   Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska, Ana. 2021. Predbrachni seksualni odnosi vo narodnata kultura na Poreche – tabu tema i realna sostojba. Vo: Etnoloshko i kulturnoantropoloshko prouchuvanje na Poreche, urednici Ljupcho S. Risteski, Aneta Svetieva, Skopje, CEIPA (281–353) (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Ashtalkovska, Ana. 2006. Predbrachni seksualni odnosi vo narodnata kultura na Golo Brdo - tabu tema i realna sostojba. Golo Brdo zhivot na granica, Skopje, IEA (93 – 107) (In Macedonian Cyrillic); Ashtalkovska, Ana. 2002. Predbrachni seksualni odnosi vo narodnata kultura na Poreche – tabu tema i realna sostojba. Vo: 70 godini od istrazhuvanjata na Jozef Obrembski vo Makedonija, Prilep (411-425) (In Macedonian Cyrillic).

society. Yet, while my colleagues tended to be more cautious and left room for self-revision, my own text lacked that openness.

The general aim of the text was to argue that the anthropology of women, in addition to making women's perspectives visible, should resist the tendency to portray them as marginalized or oppressed, and instead highlight their power and agency. Such studies were meant to show that women possessed greater rights, responsibilities, and authority than previously acknowledged during the period of their "invisibility."

The second central argument of the text opposed feminist interpretations grounded in binary oppositions, in which women are consistently positioned on the negative or subordinate side of the dichotomy. Yet, ironically, my own approach—based on the dichotomy between the imagined and the real—reproduced the same structure of opposition. The result was a new set of generalizations, only now depicting women in the traditional rural community on the positive side of the divide.

A third key point concerned the presence of contradictions within ethnographic data itself. The same interlocutor might offer contradictory statements on the same topic, depending on the context and perspective. Likewise, depending on the researcher's interpretive stance, one version might be emphasized over the other. The imagined model—corresponding to the patriarchal concept—often receives strong affirmation from interlocutors in the field. For that reason, researchers should pay close attention to the deeper perspectives that emerge from everyday lived experience, which correspond to the "real" model.

These three points underscore critical aspects that arise when women are placed at the center of anthropological inquiry. The context itself reveals the diversity among women, demonstrating that neither woman nor female subordination can be treated as universal categories. The generalizations that emerge from the literal application of binary models—especially those derived from Western feminist frameworks—often produce problematic interpretations. In this sense, concepts such as patriarchy or patrilocality are not uniform or universally applicable.

Why, then, are such interpretations problematic? Because they are exclusive and advocate for one side of the opposition—the very thing they initially sought to critique. In this case, the focus shifted uncritically from the imagined model to the real one.

The next topic through which I consistently challenged the patriarchal explanatory framework concerned women's inheritance in contemporary Macedonian society (Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska 2017: 603–618). The text drew on the experiences of women ethnologists who professionally reject patriarchy as an explanatory concept and oppose stereotypical portrayals of women as passive victims of male-dominated systems—yet who, in their personal lives, have directly encountered those very systems. Here, the contradictions in argumentation become most evident. The text reveals how deeply entrenched certain beliefs remain, even when personal experience stands in direct opposition to them.

Svetieva's observation that "in researching the mechanisms of the female subculture, one can no longer take a black-and-white view of gender participation in family and village

rights and obligations" (Svetieva 2001a: 27)—since numerous variations deviate from the publicly accepted ideal model of traditional culture—emphasizes the need to account for everyday nuances, deviations, and variations as equally important factors in studying women's status. However, my own search for such deviations entirely overlooked what patriarchal culture itself teaches us: its influence in shaping social positions, its role in socialization and education, and its persistence even in acts of resistance or deviation—those deeply internalized gendered knowledges and roles that endure even when openly defied. In my text, these dynamics were ignored; patriarchal culture was instead treated as a mere label, uncharacteristic of either past or present.

Traditional norms preventing women from inheriting property are among the clearest indicators of the patriarchal order. In my text, these norms were assigned to the imagined model and were thus dismissed as unreal if taken literally. Similarly, the term patriarchy was treated as an overly broad generalization, inadequate for describing women's positions in Macedonian society—whether in the traditional past or in the contemporary moment. This complex situation presents a serious methodological challenge: what happens when one of the key markers of patriarchy personally confronts women ethnologists and anthropologists who professionally reject it? Within their own families, many have experienced—or are on the verge of experiencing—the belief that women should not inherit property equally with men. Here, patriarchy directly and practically contradicts their own theoretical positions.

But what does the concept of patriarchy actually mean? Its core associations include male dominance and female subordination, gender inequality within the family, state, economy, religion, and other symbolic or cultural systems that sustain male authority. The concept thus encompasses numerous domains, and its use almost inevitably leads to generalization. One of Lila Abu-Lughod's aims in her research on women's everyday lives in Egypt's northwestern coast was to show Western feminists that defining patriarchy is by no means a simple task (Abu-Lughod 2008: xi). When communities are examined through such generalized and universalist concepts, a stereotypical discourse about women inevitably emerges. Consequently, when used in anthropological research, the term must always be situated within specific historical, cultural, and local contexts.

In the local context, the understanding of researchers who studied traditional culture and labeled it as patriarchal is succinctly summarized by Jelena Cvetanovska, who outlines its main characteristics: "The traditional culture of the Macedonians, as well as that of other Balkan peoples, is generally described as patriarchal. Its basic features are patrilocality (after marriage, the couple resides in the husband's family home), patrilineality (kinship traced through the male line), the higher valuation of male children as heirs of family lineage, property, and cult, and the absolute authority of the father. Based on these principles, the system of male–female relations is constructed. It is believed that its main feature is the domination of men and the subordination of women" (Cvetanovska 2014: 130). This passage provides a valid summary of the key aspects of traditional rural society, which represented the dominant or mass culture in Macedonia until the mid-20th century. Some of these features have been revitalized and reasserted in post-socialist retraditionalization processes, thereby reemerging as important research

topics—especially given their renewed influence on gendered relations in contemporary contexts. Indeed, this is precisely what my text on women's inheritance demonstrates.

The arguments it employed—still opposing the patriarchal framework—again emphasized everyday nuances meant to illustrate the "real" model. Thus, a woman excluded from family inheritance under patriarchal norms is depicted as an independent, educated woman who, though shocked by her family's behavior, refuses to engage in material disputes. Within her own household, she is "the man of the family": employed, earning a salary, paying rent and bills, while her unemployed husband cares for their child, performing "female duties." However, such nuances do not erase the enduring reality of the patriarchal principle that denies daughters equal inheritance rights. This principle—once relegated to the imagined model of traditional culture—today very concretely deprives women of property, rendering it undeniably real. This is confirmed by the Reactor study "Is There Land for Women? A Gender Analysis of Property Ownership." Data from 2023 reveal a persistent gender gap in property ownership: men hold 71% of registered property, while women own only 29% (Leshoska, Bojchevska, Mitrevska, Jolevska 2024: 27). When such data are juxtaposed, the arguments I once made against the concept of patriarchy appear deeply problematic—precisely because of how profoundly they oversimplified the issue.

Conclusion

I continue to identify with certain statements I have written in the texts problematized here, such as the following: "Besides anthropologist's cultural baggage, he or she is implementing personal identity and signature in his or her writings and research... Depending on the researcher's personal perspectives, interests, and needs, field materials which are collected will represent both models separately…" (Ashtalkovska 2005: 175, 177). Despite my awareness of the "complication" introduced by the researcher's subjectivity—which must be continuously examined—this awareness has, in my research on women in traditional culture, tended to slip between the lines. It has often remained a declarative statement rather than an active epistemological practice, displaced by a personal need not only to render women visible but also to endow them with power.

Nevertheless, personal motivations for re-examining one's position in relation to women's status evolve over time. Life experiences that contest one's professional assumptions and arguments provide the opportunity for renewed reflection and internal debate—for exercising the ability to read one's own texts as if they were authored by someone else, particularly when they are laden with contradictions. Discussions concerning women's status, for instance, are frequently influenced by the tensions I experience while attempting to raise my daughter with an awareness of these issues. In such moments, interpretations of the strong, influential, wise, or cunning women of the past often appear as little more than children's tales. These narratives remain largely absent from the educational system, where attempts to introduce a gender perspective repeatedly fail, being conflated with the stigmatized notion of "gender ideology" against which conservative actors continually protest. Children's socialization, in this sense, extends far beyond the family. It involves the entire social field—the state, peers,

grandparents from both rural and urban contexts, teachers, textbooks, the media, and the street—each of which contributes to the dissemination of gendered representations and expectations. Even when parents are positioned as the primary educators, everyday contradictions inevitably permeate the transmission of values. While I may confidently tell my daughter that she is free to choose whatever she wishes, independent of gendered prescriptions, I often question what she learns by observing my everyday life. After all, what we do often speaks louder than what we say—much like the distinction between the "ideal" and the "real" models discussed here. At times, my daily routines fully align with patriarchal expectations: care for the extended family, the child, the husband, the dog, the household, the food, and the cleanliness of the home. The image of a woman who, after fulfilling these "feminine" obligations, sits down to write a critical text on patriarchy may even appear ironic. The question "How was I raised to be preoccupied with these 'female' responsibilities?" thus becomes a profoundly relevant one. Of course, my everyday life could also yield a radically different narrative—one that directly resists patriarchal culture in multiple ways. Yet such a narrative alone would not represent the actual model. In women's life histories, these seemingly opposed representations appear deeply entangled and equally real.

The patriarchal concept is also closely connected to state politics—another dimension warranting critical inquiry. Certain indicators of patriarchal structures are empirically measurable. For example, Reactor's research on the gender gap in property ownership reveals how this imbalance correlates with lower employment rates, high economic inactivity, and lower wages among women (Leshoska, Bojchevska, Mitrevska, Jolevska 2024: 41). The constant threat that long-acquired women's rights may suddenly be rescinded—depending on the ideological orientation of the ruling political party—is an ever-present concern, as demonstrated by the controversial 2013 abortion law. The alarming data on perpetrators of domestic violence, femicides, and the near absence of comprehensive protection strategies for women victims are daily reminders of the persistence of structural inequality. Consequently, alongside an ethnology and anthropology of women that examines the powerful, influential, and resilient figures of traditional culture, there is a pressing need to ask how feminist anthropology in the Macedonian context will address and engage with such contemporary social and political realities. A rare and valuable example of critical engagement with state policies employing patriarchal frameworks is Ines Crvenkovska Risteska's text "It's Time for a Baby! Motherhood and Nationalism according to Examples from the Republic of Macedonia" (Crvenkovska Risteska 2018: 148–184).

Despite the critiques articulated here, the ethnology and anthropology of women have produced significant scholarly contributions. Most notably, they have relativized the long-standing tendency to idealize and romanticize "tradition" and "the past." Particularly when examining women's statuses and roles within traditional culture, the invocation of a singular "Macedonian woman" becomes increasingly untenable. Not all "Macedonian women" of the past were virtuous and obedient; there were submissive and dominant, compliant and defiant, healers and witches alike.

A further significant contribution lies in the methodological innovations necessitated by a focus on women's perspectives. In these studies, lived experience has

gained prominence over depersonalized, normative narratives that often reproduce an imagined model of the community. This shift entails a critical reconsideration of the researcher's positionality, reflexivity, ethical stance, and relationship with interlocutors, as well as the use of dialogical interviewing, trust-building, and autoethnography—in short, the methodological transformations broadly encompassed by the term feminist methodology[9].

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9   See for example Hesse-Biber, Yaiser 2004; Škrbić Alempijevic, Potkonjak, Rubić 2016: 103-123; Škorić 2001; more about the Macedonian context in Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska 2015: 108-130.

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