

A MUSLIM SAINT OR A CONQUEROR: MYTHS AND THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

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The present research aims to detect tendencies in the attitudes to the religious Other in Bulgaria through different memories about the most revered saint of Muslim Bulgarians – Enihan Baba. His *tuyrbe* (tomb) is located on the Svoboda Peak (called Enihan and Momchil in the past) in the district of Banite in the Rhodope Mountains. The cult complex under study is located in a contact area of different ethno-confessional groups – Bulgarians (Muslims and Christians), and Turks. This borderline state favours the symbolic expression of different religious identities, and that is precisely what the region under study is, being meaningfully called “the Rhodopean Mecca”. The paper will present the role of oral traditions, literary works, the homeland researchers’ works, films and media in the construction of myths that are representative of the policy towards the religious Other.

Theoretically, this research is based on the thesis that there are a number of collective memories that are social and cultural constructs and are determined by the identities of the remembering groups (Халбваск 1996: 97; Gillis 1994: 5; Assmann 2000; Асман 2001: 51). The memory is always a current phenomenon, the past being replaced according to the present needs (Лойентал 2002: 493; Нора 2004: 38). It is also a main instrument through which identities are constructed (Olick, Robbins 1998: 133).

The applied methods of historical and social anthropology allow us to analyze the dynamics of identity in both a diachronic and a synchronic aspect, thus revealing the close relationship between social context and individual/collective identity. On the other hand, the specifics of the qualitative methods based on interviews, makes the researcher face a self-presentation depending on the narrative configuration. The fieldwork data used in the present article were collected mostly in 2007, 2008 and 2009 in the Middle Rhodopes¹ but some interviews were conducted as early as 1994-1998.

The Muslim Bulgarian population in Bulgaria numbers about 180 000 people mostly living in the Rhodope Mountains. Their community formed during the period of Ottoman domination, when local mountain populations accepted Islam but continued speaking the Bulgarian language. In the 20th century, the restored Bulgarian state held, varying in intensity, a policy of integrating Muslim Bulgarians into the Bulgarian nation, using coercive measures such as a forced name-change, conversion, and a ban on practicing religious rituals. In 1912-1913 the Bulgarian church, using the military situation of the Balkan War, forcibly converted the Muslim Bulgarians. The process went through a predictable twist right after the Balkan War (Елдьров 2004). The next period of intensified state policy towards the Muslim Bulgarians is expressed in the activity of the Rodina Movement in the second half of the 30’s and early 40’s of the 20th century, which, however, does not result in any religious conversion.

The manifestation of attachment to religious traditions (be it Christian or Muslim) during the socialist period are interpreted negatively in the light of the prevailing ideology of atheism. From the late 50’s of the 20th c. the Bulgarian leaders follow a consistent policy of limiting the influence of Islam within the so-called „cultural revolution”, which consists of „upgrading” clothing and replacing the Muslim festivals with socialist ones (Гривев 2003: 237). Another renaming of Bulgarian Muslims in the 70’s of the 20th c. is in the context of a ban on professing Islam and publicly demonstrating religious belonging (through clothing, visits to houses of prayer, celebration of religious festivals)

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(Георгиева 1998: 293; Иванова 2002; Груев, Калъонски 2008). While part of the Muslim Bulgarians take this as a threat to their identity and close themselves within group (e.g. in some areas of the Western Rhodopes), others (e.g. in the Middle Rhodopes) see this as an opportunity for a fuller integration into the Bulgarian society. Both trends continue to develop also in the transition period following the 1989 changes.

After the democratic changes in Bulgaria in 1989, Muslims are given the opportunity to restore their Muslim names and to freely profess their religion. The focus of attention in the present report is on Muslim Bulgarians, among which divergent trends² are visible. The interaction of the ruling policies with different strategies of the Muslim Bulgarians to adapt to the changing social environment leads to various differences in their self-identification.

Nowadays, some of the Bulgarian Muslims claim a Turkish identity in the presence of strangers, thus trying to accentuate on their Muslim belonging. The Turkish self-identification in the villages under research is expressed by representatives of the oldest generation of Muslim Bulgarians who use the ethnonym “Turks” in the sense of “Muslims”, elucidating that they are actually “Pomaks”.

The self-denomination “Pomaks” is characteristic of many people at a middle and older age in the region. In the presence of strangers they prefer to use the community name “Bulgaro-Mohammedan”, which was initially imposed on them, but later on accepted. Representatives of this provisional group conform their attachment to Islam with their Bulgarian civil identity. They share a feeling of being different from both Turks and Bulgarians. People of middle and younger age consider themselves “Bulgarians”, giving a preference to the Bulgarian ethnic and language identity over the religious one. For them, the Muslim religious practice is more of an expression of tradition rather than following a specific religious doctrine.

The fieldwork data reveal the existence of mutually contradicting opinions about Enihan Baba. They vary from extremely positive (Enihan – saint) to pointedly negative (Enihan – conqueror) depending on to the generation, social class and confessional group of the interviewees. The diversification of the memory of what Enihan was leads to the formation of various memory groups. They, in turn, reflect the transformation processes in the Muslim Bulgarians’ identity. The preference for one or another legend positions religious identity within the hierarchy of the complex personal identity. On the other hand, it allows for an analysis of the specific context that causes the choice of the memory preferred (Troeva 2010).

The Enihan Peak was first mentioned in the firman of Sultan Selim I, issued in 1519, the Enihan Mountain being among the listed territories (Маринов 1937: 2). In the materials of the homeland researchers from the end of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th century, Enihan Peak is described as a Muslim Bulgarians’ sanctuary. For the first time Enihan is associated with legends about the Turkish conquest of the Rhodopes by the Rodina Movement’s activist P. Marinov in 1936. He published an expose according to which the leader of the Turks Enihan was killed in a battle while conquering the Rhodopes and was buried on the peak of the mountain (Маринов 1936: 4; Маринов 1938: 2-3).

The review of publications about Enihan shows the paths of distributing certain motifs. An exceptional role in this respect is played by the laic historical literature, whose authors, with a few exceptions, are Christian Bulgarians. In the following decades, this story of the bloody conquest of the Rhodopes, in which the Turkish military leader Enihan Baba was a significant figure, gradually became a major historiographic story. The constantly increasing works of homeland researchers played an important role in that process. But the concept of Enihan the conqueror became popular with the general public when his name was included in Anton Donchev’s novel “Vreme Razdelno” (“Time of Parting”) published in 1964. The book is based on the idea that the population of the Rhodopes was islamized by force. According to the fictional text of the novel Enihan was a Turkish commander who

² The various tendencies in the self-identification of Bulgarian Muslims are conditioned by multiple historic, political, social and local factors that have attracted the attention of researchers (Karagiannis 1997; Георгиева 1998; Todorova 1998; Brunnbauer 1998; Balicki 1999; Brunnbauer 1999; Brunnbauer 2002; Telbizova-Sack 1999; Telbizova-Sack 2000; Velinov 2001; Karagiannis 2005; Benovska-Sabkova 2006; Steinke, Voss 2007; Груев, Калъонски 2008, Troeva 2010).

“killed our grandfathers and captured our grandmothers”, his grave was actually symbolic, there were no bones in it, and this meant that the Rhodopes had no conqueror (Дончев 1964: 234-235).

While working on the film “Time of Parting”³ in 1986, the crew initially comes to the village just off the tyurbe (Davidkovo) to shoot the episode about Enihan Baba on location, but because of bad weather gives up. Although the filming on Svoboda Peak does not happen, the local people clearly associate Enihan of the fictional work with Enihan Baba from their region. For the Muslim Bulgarians this association is unpleasant and unacceptable because of the idea of the forceful conversion to Islam which the film advances. Therefore, they keep avoiding any comment on the film in front of outside observers to this day. Christian Bulgarians, however, take the film “Time of Parting” as an illustration of what happened in the Rhodope Mountains a few centuries ago.

In the oral tradition and in the sources about the Muslim saints on the Balkans there are some motives in which they are presented as *ghazi* warriors (conquerors of territories for the Islam) (Евлия Челеби 1972: 293; Михайлова 1996: 352; Григоров 1998: 554; Карамихова 1999: 247; Граматикова 2001: 207; Карамихова 2002: 33, 42; Алексиев 2005: 28, 62, 136; Миков 2007: 92). The cult towards saints and their graves that spread among Muslim Bulgarians was channeled into an orthodox direction by Sunni preachers (Лозанова 1999: 32), as nowadays Muslim Bulgarians identify themselves as followers of the Sunni Islam. Probably, legends about other babas as military commanders and missionaries from different Muslim Heterodox brotherhoods served as a foundation for the formation of the idea about Enihan Baba the Conqueror. Petar Marinov, who published this interpretation of the conquest of the Rhodopes was one of the activists of the „*Rodina*” („Motherland”) organization, which from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s pursued an active policy of integration of the Muslim-Bulgarian population into the Bulgarian nation often using forceful methods. Following the development of the various historiographic theses throughout the years, we can see that they were determined by the specific social-political context. For decades the state policy of integrating Muslim Bulgarians into the Bulgarian nation went along with the idea that they had been forcibly islamized by the Ottoman Turks. The concept of Enihan the Conqueror was widespread exactly in that same ideological context. Nowadays, political confrontations breathe new life into it, transforming Enihan into their symbolic figure (Троева-Григорова 2008).

A great role for shaping the general public’s idea of Enihan has been played by the media and its publications in the last few years about the erection of a new building on Enihan Baba’s tyurbe in 2004. The latter became a widely commented issue in the national media and vitalized the memory-forming processes. In order to counteract the building of the new tomb, nationalistic circles used the idea of “*the conqueror of the Rhodopes*”. A stone plaque in memory of Momchil Voyvoda, a local ruler in the Rhodopes who fought against the Turks in the 14th century, was set up near the tyurbe by Christians. The plaque reads: „In memory of Momchil Voyvoda, defender of the Rhodopes Mountains against the Ottoman oppressors. VMRO-BND”. Placing the memorial plaque of Momchil unlocks a series of acts to discredit and eliminate the “monument” of the Other.

The Bulgarian Christians from the researched region who were interviewed consider the newly-built tyurbe a means of MRF (the Turks’ party in Bulgaria) to manipulate the Muslim Bulgarians. They narrate the story of Enihan the conqueror referring to laic historical literature. A respondent from Smolyan said that the construction of the tyurbe could have been prevented if a monument of Momchil had been erected on the peak as early as in communist times. A Bulgarian Christian from the village of Davidkovo, who is greatly interested in the history of the area, said he only “recently” learned that Momchil Voyvoda fought and died on Svoboda Peak. The fact that a memorial plaque has been installed there now is a proof for the respondent that Momchil really fought in these places – “*having a monument of Momchil is based on something*”. In an interview with a Bulgarian Christian from the village of Monastery I recorded a narration in which the respondent expressed the conviction that the tyurbe was actually the hero Momchil’s tomb while Enihan was the name of the area. The argument for the existence of an ancient Thracian sanctuary on the peak is perceived by respondents as a counter-argument against the erection of the tyurbe – “They have made it up or discovered it now. We have never heard of a sanctuary. There might have been, but now to

³ On the novel and film “Time of Parting” see: Тодорова 2001; Апетов 2006 and the literature on this subject presented on p. 522.

oppose what is happening up there, the other side tries to come up with something or there was something indeed” (Troeva 2009).

Some of the Muslim Bulgarians’ stories about Enihan focus on the ban of professing Muslim faith in the period of socialism, the authorities’ encroachment on the tyurbe, and the sacrifices (Kurbans) performed at the place. Oral narratives report three demolitions of the tyurbe – “*They put it down three times... Because Christians hate Muslims*” (Bosilkovo). (The last reply of the interviewee was followed by the cries: “silent”, “quiet” from the women present). A motif often occurring in the narratives is the one about the divine punishment following the destruction of the tyurbe in the form of heavy hail in the region, accidents and illnesses to people who had participated in the destruction of the tomb.

According to their views on Enihan, the Muslim Bulgarians interviewed can be divided into several provisional groups. The first group is influenced by the negative media campaign against Enihan and his tomb. A young Muslim Bulgarian woman from the village of Belitsa has read publications about Enihan which have shaped her idea about him – “*I’ve read many books and this affects me. So I cannot accept. The old grandmothers think that Inihan was buried there. Who is Inihan, I know who Inihan is. And for me he is an invader, nothing more. And therefore I feel reserved. Otherwise, older people believe that anyone who brings Kurban and kills it, will have his intentions fulfilled*” (Belitsa). The respondent’s mother-in-law argues that Enihan is “a man of God”, which her daughter-in-law considers a “delusion” and states that she herself cannot bow down to “a conqueror and an invader”.

The second provisional memory group of Muslim Bulgarians is more numerous, its members revering Enihan as a saint. According to the recorded fieldwork data, Enihan and his two brothers are *evliya, people of Allah, melyayketa, peygamberi* who did only good to people. According to the stories, Enihan himself lived at the peak, where he was killed and buried. My question about who killed him, however, received no answer in most cases, as Muslim Bulgarians associate the idea of the Rhodope Mountains’ conquest to the thesis of the forceful imposition of Islam that most of them do not accept as a version of their past. In fieldwork data from the mid 90’s the Muslim Bulgarians of this second provisional group mention that Enihan was a commander. 15 years later, after the negative media campaign started in 2004, which popularized the version about Enihan the conqueror of the Rhodope Mountains, this definition is almost absent from the narrative biographies of the saint. It is replaced, however, by the legend that Enihan was an Arab preacher of Islam, who came to these lands as early as the 9th century, i.e. before the Ottomans (Davidkovo)⁴. This legend, on the one hand, countered the idea of Enihan as an Ottoman conqueror, and on the other, moved the adoption of Islam by the local population a few centuries back in time, thereby discarding the proposition of the forceful imposition of Islam by the Turks.

In the researched region there is still a group of stories in which Enihan is identified not as a Turkish commander, conqueror of the Rhodope Mountains, but as a Turkish captain protecting the Rhodopes. The legends referred to are recorded by adult Bulgarian Muslims who live near the tyurbe, respectively, near the former Bulgarian-Turkish border. According to them, Enihan was a Turk who stopped the retreat of the Turks before the Russian army and was killed and buried on the peak. These stories reflect the establishment of the border between the Principality of Bulgaria and Turkey on Svoboda Peak. They present Enihan as a defender of the Muslim population against the advancing Russian army and illustrate the confrontating memories of Christians and Muslims in terms of the Russian-Turkish war from 1877-1878.

Older people, for whom the Muslim religion is an essential identity element, see Enihan as one of the signs of that identity. In the villages lying up to 30 kilometers away from the tyurbe, the Enihan cult is the strongest. The Muslim Bulgarians (including those who emigrated from the area to the cities) go to the peak to perform the annual Kurban of each village and also on personal occasions – family and clan meetings, performing Kurbans for illness and pleading to the saint for help⁵. The visits to Enihan’s tyurbe and the organized Kurbans are turning into a major form of religious expression of both the local Muslim Bulgarians and the ones who have migrated from the region.

⁴ On the quasi-history that Muslim Bulgarians tell about their past see: Лозанова 1997.

⁵ On the pilgrimage to Enihan’s tyurbe see: Valtchinova 2008.

Representatives of the local Muslim-Bulgarian intelligence form the third and smallest group of interviewed people. They also stand against the idea that Enihan is an Ottoman conqueror of the Rhodopes. The local researchers interviewed support the hypothesis that there is an ancient Thracian sanctuary on Svoboda Peak. These new interpretations of local history reflect the new trends in the transformation of the Muslim Bulgarians' identity.

The emphasis on the ancient past of the religion-important Svoboda Peak supports the idea of continuity and a long tradition of which religion (in this case, Islam) is only an outer shell, which the authors are keen to belittle. The association of the peak with the sanctuary of Dionysus, the most sacred site of the Bulgarian lands in antiquity, however, is used as an argument both from the opponents of Enihan's *tyurbe* and by its defenders.

In the new context, the united figure of the saint-ghazi of the legends of Heterodox Muslims finds a different reading among the Muslim Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Christians. While in a Turkish-speaking environment the figure of the saint-conqueror (e.g. the *babas* mentioned above) is respected⁶, the Muslim Bulgarians associate the idea of conquest with the thesis of the forceful imposition of Islam that most of them do not accept as a version of their past. This is why in the oral narratives of Muslim Bulgarians the version of Enihan the conqueror is rejected. For Muslim Bulgarians Enihan is a saint who did and continues doing good to people. The only elements in the contemporary "biography" of the saint which bear the relationship with the prototype of the saint-ghazi but is the product of a new social situation, is the Muslim Bulgarians' mentioning that Enihan brought "faith" (read Islam) and that he was an *evliya* protecting the land from invaders. Christian Bulgarians hold a contrary opinion by adopting P. Marinov's viewpoint of Enihan as a cruel conqueror.

The preference of a certain idea of Enihan and of the regions' history depends also on the age of the interviewee: for the elderly Muslim Bulgarians he is a saint, mid-aged people hesitate in their attitude to him, while the young are more likely to adopt the idea of Enihan the conqueror. These mutually exclusive memories reflect the dynamics in the Muslim Bulgarians' identity.

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⁶ B. Alexiev thinks that the idea of the saints as Ottoman commanders who were killed in a battle against the enemy is a product of the modern Turkish nationalistic mythologisation, in which the religious figure is secularized (Алексиев 2005: 62).

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