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OLD AGE-UGLY AGE: ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES ON THE CHILDLESS ELDERS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Abstract: The text focuses upon life stories of childless elders from Macedonia. Field materials include interviews with childless married couples from different villages throughout Macedonia, conducted during the last 15 years. Their stories provide the basic empirical data that enable following the changes of traditional values and norms related to old parents or relatives. Special attention is dedicated to the paradoxical (and often ironic) position of these people, who, due the general tendency of abandoning old parents by their children, end up equally lonely and vulnerable as those parents who have children.

Although big families are not a guarantee for dignified old age any more, it is exactly these so called ‘traditional values’ that were promoted by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia in the period 2006-2017, though public campaigns that presented big families as a value that should be sustained and cherished. This article analyses the gap between the realistic state of affairs of the elderly, and the constructed, idealized notion of a secure and happy old age that combines economic, political, as well as emotional aspects.

Key words: childless, elders, children, family, economy, property, campaigns.

“Children, yes. We just have to plan everything. We have time, we’re young” – these are the opening lines of one the advertisements in the frames of the campaign for third child of the ex-Government of the Republic of Macedonia, led by VMRO-DPMNE. Two parallel narratives follow the life of two different married couples. One is “intellectual”, that focuses upon career instead upon the desire for progeny, and continuously delays the social “obligation” for reproduction. The other pair, whose voice cannot be heard in the ad, gets children early-on, without too much deliberation. While the man and the woman from the first story slowly age, living lonely in their luxurious but dark apartment, the pair from the second ad lives in a modest home painted in pastel colors, full of kids who then give birth to their own children, while the house grows lively and happy. “Create a Future”, says the final message on the screen (see at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7XEMD8f6Ok>).

This is just one of the advertisements in the frames of the campaign for promoting the “importance of family, tax reductions for having a third child and elevating patriotism” that the Government of RM has started in 2008.¹ Abundantly promoted through the state

1 The campaign of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, titled “Family and children are our biggest treasure” includes 10 video advertisements. Another one, titled “Choose life. You have a right to choose!”, explaining the consequences of abortion, includes 8 advertisements.

broadcasting network, the Macedonian Radio and Television, especially during breaks of live coverage of important sports events, it presents old age as a senseless period of life if one does not have children. Biological reproduction is treated as a personal choice that must be undertaken, regardless that there are individuals that do not have such a choice - married couples that due to different medical and other reasons simply cannot have children. The former, as well as the latter, according to the campaign, are not only sentenced to intimate suffering, but also – and more importantly – they contribute to the undermining of the foundations of the collective as such, that could lead to its annihilation. At the same time, multiply children families are defined as “traditional value”, a result of some kind of historical continuity, that presents a guarantee for sustaining the community, but also for sustaining one’s own secure and happy old age.

Through field interviews with childless elderly people, collected during the last 15 years from different parts of Macedonia, belonging to communities with different confessional affiliation (Christian and Islamic), that have not been analyzed and published so far, we will try to trace the evolution of the attitudes and the norms related to old age in general, and especially to the childless elders. We will focus upon the gap between the realistic situation of these people, and the constructed ideal related to their treatment, in the frames of the family, as well as in the frames of the wider community. The main researched issue is – what is the present and the future of the ones that did not succeed in “creating a future”?

No country for old men

When one opens the discussion on the contemporary treatment of old age during interviews with elderly interviewees on the field, the dominant discourse is that in the past “there was order”, i.e. that the generational hierarchy was respected, and that the elderly held much stronger position in society than today. The older ethnographic materials from Macedonia and neighboring countries yield an impression that this power was so significant, that one can speak even of *gerontocracy*, a social system governed by old people, at the level of the family, and at the level of the wider community (see for example: Маринов 1995: 51, Мирчевска 2003: 146, 154, Русић 1956: 2, 3; Павловић 1928, 365, Филиповић 1939: 21).

While examining these materials one faces the problem of defining the age stratification (when was a person considered as sufficiently ‘old’ to be responsible for the regulation of the social and economic life of the family and/or the village). However, the term “old man” (starec) was undoubtedly a sign of a high social rank. According to the etymological dictionary of Croatian and Serbian language by Petar Skok, the term “old”, besides “past” and “ancient” historically had also the meaning of “high”, “respected”, “charismatic” and “emasculated” person (Skok 1971: under ‘old’). Thus, when considering the relation towards old age and towards the elderly, it is very important to define if one speaks about the still healthy and capable old people, or about the sick and totally worn-out, the ‘prestareni’ (the ‘over-aged’). The data on the high status of the first group in the past is in no way an automatic proof that the same status was enjoyed by the second group – those are individuals belonging to two different social categories, and thus have different statuses.

The treatment of old age in Macedonian ethnology has not obtained the attention it deserves. This presents a paradox, especially if one takes into account the high respect that ethnologists demonstrate regarding the field data gathered from elderly interviewees, whose statements are considered as primary sources, especially when it comes to customs and beliefs that are dying or that have already died-out. There is only one research done by a Macedonian ethnologist so far that examines contemporary problems of elderly households (diploma work of Ines Crvenkovska-Risteska: “Elderly households in the villages of Poreche: contemporary situation”, defended at the Department of Ethnology in 2002). The issues related to contemporary treatment of old age are marginally mentioned in a chapter of Iliina Jakimovska’s PhD thesis, dedicated to the body in Macedonian folk culture (“The young versus the old body: norms regarding age”) (Јакимовска 2009: 171-220).

The reason for this situation is that the questions posed to elderly interviewees in frames of other researches usually refer to their memories, i.e. to their youth, and not to their current life and status. Thus, old age remains marginalized as a relevant scientific topic. Their attempts to speak about their situation even without being asked about it, a situation which is difficult not only due to the problems that old age somehow presupposes (health issues, physical decline) but also because of their marginal status and absence of social authority, are interpreted as typical old-age nostalgia. “Although we started examining the social taboos of dying, we have skipped a long period prior to death, known as old age. For the sake of truth, it is easier to deal with death, than with the problem of living as an old person. Death is a dramatic moment that takes place only once, while old age is an every-day process of dealing with it”, says Robert Butler in “Tragedy of old age in America”, a situation that can be directly copied into Macedonian context (Butler 1989: 219). It is as if the researchers are afraid of old age, that reminds them of their own future powerlessness and mortality.

At first, field interviews that present the basis of this text have also been conducted having in mind childlessness and not old age as such. However, few of them, with individuals and couples from rural areas in Western Macedonia, have resulted in separate category, the one of childless elders. We define it as a separate one, seen from an aspect of the ideal cultural model, according to which they should face different (bigger) life problems in comparison to the ones that are close by age, but have children. However, when analyzed in more detail, the statements of 19 interviewees, of which three marital childless couples, both Christian and Islamic, reflect a slightly different story.

The economy of childlessness

Vaska, born in 1924, and Cane, born 1922, attribute the reason for not having children to God, and do not blame each other. They had good life marked by care for Cane’s parents, especially his mother, that did not reflect the traditional notion of a mother in law who creates additional pressure on this issue, but was really sympathetic about it. Even more, she undertook an important practical step for securing old age of this couple, transferring a major part of the property to her first and most loved childless son. According to her estimation, in this way some of her grandchildren, from Cane’s four

brothers, might be thus motivated to take care of him when he gets old, in exchange for money.

This is just one of the often cited examples in the interviews, in which property is treated as a resource for securing childless old age, that is in cases where old people actually own such property, and if it is sufficiently attractive for future owners. Potential inheritors in the closest social proximity of these elders are aware that the property will be handed out to the one providing the best care. Although usually the family does not openly speak about this, but leaves it ‘hanging’ out there unspoken, an open question posed in frames of an interview yields the following answer: “We will give to the one that takes care of us”.²

Competiveness among relatives related to inheriting property of such couples usually contains other elements besides the purely economical ones. They come in the form of exchange of service (‘dogleduvanje’, taking care until death), or exchange of goods (property or money). Thus, in the case of another childless couple that desired to adopt a child, at the very moment when all documentation was ready and the support of the closest family was obtained, one of the sisters in law hatefully commented that they will be adopting someone’s “bastards”. This made the future adoptees change their mind, although they interpreted their relative’s reaction as purposeful and selfish, motivated by one’s own benefit – to inherit the property if there is no one else to do it. “Of course they have you under their thumb if you don’t have kids. They always say – we will get this, we will get that”. Childlessness is taken as the key element not only when interpreting hostilities inside the family, but also concerning the wider community, since the couple is left on its own devices (‘without sons, without sons in law’). As if without children, its emotional immunity is being lowered. Seen from this point of view, even being wealthy does not mean much in old age, since material things are deemed worthless if there is no one to inherit them. As one of our female interviewees says: “Now there is only us. In this building. It’s nice, nice, three rooms, a kitchen. But there are no people In it. Who will inhabit it, mice?”³

However, in other examples relatives do not limit themselves to mocking comments, but take an active role, trying to magically “tie-up” the couple whose inheritance their desire (tying-up is a black magic procedure aiming to prevent a couple having children, usually undertaken during the couple’s wedding). Blaguna from the region of Veles is thus convinced that her lack of children is a result of magic spell cast by her husband’s family. The proof for this was found in the old house where she and her husband Atanas lived – two keys, nailed to each other, that were however found too late with the help of a sorcerer. According to the interpretation of this couple, the reason for such atrocity is a result of ‘lakomija za sermija’ (dialect: hunger for wealth)⁴ of the closest relatives on the husband’s side, who want to obtain a larger portion of the property in proportion to the childless relatives. In order to outsmart the evil relatives, and to have someone to take

2 Non-archived field material: V. Sh., female born 1924, C. Sh., her husband, born 1922, Strushki Drimkol area in Macedonia, recorded in 2000.

3 Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology DEM_13, L. M. female born in 1931 in the region of Veles, recorded in 1999.

4 Archive of IEA DEM_17, B. female born in 1916, region of Veles, recorded in 1999.

care of them when they get old, Blaguna and Atanas adopted a girl when she was only 5 months old. She grew up and got married, but the son in law, living in the same house with his wife's parents, got scared of the strenuous agricultural work, and together with his wife decided to move to the city. Thus, besides all of their efforts, Blaguna and Atanas live alone.

Economic independence is not only an important element in the hands of the childless couples, but also for the ones that have never been married, especially when it comes to women. Jovana has dedicated all her life to taking care of her parents, since her three brothers and one sister live either abroad, or in the city. Since she is not married and has no children, it is somehow 'logical' that she is obliged to take care of her parents. Her father has sold sheep to obtain her pension documents. Now she receives minimal pension, but it provides her with dignified old age: "It is different when you can pay your own expenses, and another thing when you have to wait for someone to do it for you". This was somehow a compensation, a favor done to her by her father since he felt that the fact that she cared for him and his wife was the main reason why she never married. He often did not let her marry someone she liked or vice versa, chose someone she did not fancy. Even today (the interview was conducted in 2014), at the age of 70, she is being proposed by retired man from neighboring cities, but her argument against is: "Why do I need that? To build graves together?"⁵

“To be born as a girl is a curse”

However, the example of Jovana is an exception when it comes to the care that daughters provide for their biological parents. Couples that have only female children, when they get old, experience the same destiny as the ones that do not have children at all. The reason is that the female child after getting married “belongs” to another house and to other “parents” (to whom she refers as to *mother* and *father*), and has to take care of them. This happens even if the daughter or daughters live in the same villages. For the ones married in another village or in the city, providing care for their parents is physically complicated, and in the isolated villages even impossible. This is especially valid when it comes to communities that speak Macedonian language, but are of Islamic confession. The customary norm in these communities implies that parents should not stay alone when old, so that man who migrate leave alone, while their wives remain in the village. Thus, they are obliged from the position of daughters-in-law to take care for the husband's old parents, and this obligation is even more important than the one for taking care of one's own parents, from the position of daughters. Such marital couples practically spend their whole active working life separated, men at 'pechalba' while women are at home with the mother and father in law. They meet few times a year – during important holidays or during summer breaks. This is considered a kind of sacrifice, in order to respect the important traditional norm, that presupposes obligatory manifestation of respect of young people towards their elders.

Still, interviewees who are ready to speak about the realistic, and not only the ideal aspects of this norm, find that today young people do not consider taking care of

5 Non-archived field material: J., female born in 1945, village of Mariovo, recorded in 2014.

their elders as their duty, and this is valid equally for the daughters, daughters in law and the sons. The most pessimistic ones say that today elders are treated, both by their own children and the wider community, as a “redundancy”, even as “trash”. According to them, even small children today have much bigger privileges and rights in relation to the elders – they enjoy luxuries compared to the situation of old people. An extreme example is cited to illustrate this point: a son has locked his mother in a barn, and has treated her so badly that the grandsons tried to save her, providing secretly food. Finally she was found frozen and dead, which according to the interviewee telling this story is a proof of the inescapable loneliness and bad ending of the old people in contemporary context.

The fact that having a child or a number of children is no guarantee whatsoever for a secure old age, especially if the child is female, is illustrated by the example of Fatima, who has one daughter. After the daughter got married, Fatima remained alone. Her health, both physical and psychological, started deteriorating, among other things causing her to become passionate smoker, pretty atypical for the environment where she lives. Women from these villages, inhabited by Macedonian-speaking Muslims, are strictly forbidden to smoke. This is why she does it secretly, hiding from other villagers, especially from other women. The situation escalated, so that Fatima’s husband had to give up his work abroad, and come back so that his wife could sleep. Fatima was very dedicated to him since she felt guilty of not bearing a male child. She, as well as other women that have given birth to only girls (in one case of a female interviewee even 8 of them!), they are not treated the same as women who are childless, but they have a lower status in the wider family.

Probably the best illustration of the equal fate of those elderly that have children, and those who don’t, is the one of a marital couple from Poreche, and their ten year younger neighbor from the same village. They interpret their lack of children to magic done by a female relative. One day after their wedding, the wife found a towel full of “birds’ heads, mice legs, earth taken from a cemetery, all tied up”. She asked for help in monasteries and from sorcerers, but since her husband is a policeman he could not attend such places. They find consolation for their lack of children in the fact that old people in Macedonia live alone in the villages, regardless if they have children or not: “We are lonely old people, but our life is good, it is not important if we have or we don’t have [children]”.⁶

On the other hand, their neighbor has four daughters, and they all live in near cities in Macedonia. She lives alone in a big house after her husband died, and she says that even before, but especially now, she leads the same life as her childless neighbors, due to the tendency of young people to move out. “See, even the ones that have children remain without support. My children left. No one knows one’s destiny”⁷, she says in the interview. A woman from a village near Strumica, who has given birth to 5 daughters, lives alone now, and her husband died young. When she had the fifth the whole family cried. She was not bitten by her husband, but often tended wounds of her relative who was childless, putting onion where she was bitten by her husband, who blamed her for not having children. This couple decided to adopt a son, but he, when he realized that they

6 Archive of IEA, DEM_60, female born 1932 and D., her husband, born 1931, Poreche region, recorded in 2000.

7 Archive of IEA, DEM_60, E. female born 1941 in Poreche, recorded in 2000.

are not his biological parents, ceased referring to them as ‘mum and ‘dad’, and called the “the old ones” instead. He started drinking and not taking care of them, and he neglected his own wife and kids.

This last example, as well as the previous statements of the informants, shows that not having children, i.e. having such that do not feel an obligation to take care of their parents, is practically the same thing. The fact that this is not such a new phenomenon is illustrated by few contradictory Macedonian proverbs – ones that cherish the ideal of reproduction of each individual (“Each plant leaves another” or “Everyone that has children is considered rich”), and others that illustrate the bleak reality of having such progeny that does not provide support. Such are “Better to give birth to a stone than to a bad son, since the stone could be put in the mud and people would step on it and say – God should reward the one who has put it there, while everyone curses disrespectful children”, “A man is elevated by his children, but also he could get destroyed by them” and “A bad child should not own anything”.

Conclusion

Contrary to the ideal of a big family in traditional culture, politically (mis)used to promote conservative family politics of the previous governing party, the stories of the interviewees from rural areas in Macedonia, from the period 1999-2014, show that having a progeny is not a guarantee for secure and happy old age. An equally important element in the realization of this ideal is owning an attractive property, that could be used in old age as an element of transaction, i.e. as a motif for one’s own children or relatives to provide care. Having solely female children is treated almost the same as being childless, due to the obligation of daughters in law to provide care for the husband’s family, and not for one’s own parents, especially if the latter do not live close by. Generally, the principle of respecting the elders, that has a status of a norm in the older ethnographic materials, is not valid any more. One of the interviewees deconstructs this myth, saying that even before one could not speak about an unconditional sacrifice of the young ones, but that their respect was a result of the fact that economic power was held by older people. They exercised this authority until their death, so that the “care” of the young was in fact a result of their dependence. Industrialization and the migration from the villages to the cities have changed that, so “today young people have their own salary and they do not need anything from the old. This is why an old person is not protected any more”.⁸

This research focused upon the status of the old childless individuals and couples that live in different villages throughout Macedonia. Conducting a separate one related to urban settlements could be a good basis for comparison of the status of childless elders based upon place of living and the proximity to goods and services. One of the interviewees from our research was especially revolted due to the unequal treatment of the retired persons in Macedonia, saying that the ones from Skopje are the most privileged, since they, starting from 2012, can use 200 city buses and free rides 12 days a month (Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays), while old people from his isolated village “cannot go to the city even with their own money once a month” due to absence of an asphalt

8 Non-archived field material: C., male, born 1929 in Mariovo, recorded in 2014.

road.⁹ In meantime, pensioners have also got free train rides through Macedonia, which is considered a populist move of the ex-Government (supported by the current one as well), in order to obtain the votes of the senior population.

“My grand-grand mother had seven kids, that she raised through two wars. My grandmother had five kids, she raised them through the Second World War. An extra mouth meant famine for all. We were four brothers and sisters. We did not have much, but we did not crave anything. Today’s youth – we don’t have money, wait until we buy an apartment, we have time. The ones like me who are at the end of the road do not have much time left. We want to rejoice with grandchildren, to know that we leave someone behind. I would like to say to the young ones that once they get old there will be no greater joy than their children and their grandchildren. Family is important, and children are our greatest fortune”, says an elderly gentlemen in one of the ads in the frames of the above mentioned campaign, while seated in a room full of antique furniture and a piano, while going through the pages of a family album (see at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jARYXyhtIqs>)

Our interviewees cannot identify themselves with this person and his story. They, and the old people around them, are left to their own devices, regardless if they have biological or adopted children. They live in modest homes, without fancy furniture or a piano. Answering the question about their future and who will take care of them when they lose their strength, one of the interviewees says: “Well, good question. God almighty.”¹⁰

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9 Non-archived field material: idem.

10 Non-archived field material: J., female born 194 in Mariovo, recorded in 2014.

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