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BURIAL CULTURE OF ALBANIANS IN VELIKI TRNOVAC (BUJANOVAC)*

ABOUT VELIKI TRNOVAC

Veliki Trnovac is one of the older villages in the Valley of Vranje (Трифунски 1963). As a Serbian settlement it was mentioned as early as in 1400 while in the Turkish censuses it was regularly recorded since the sixteenth century as a “big village.” With the coming of the settlers from North Albania and *Malësia* in the late eighteenth century there started the moving out of native Serbian population. The last Serbs left it in the mid-sixties of the twentieth century. Today the largest village in Bujanovac is completely settled down by Albanians. There are three mosques and the church of Saint Emperor Constantine and Empress Helen¹ (set up in 1937 on the foundations of a destroyed Serbian temple) (Стаменковић 2001).

Because of its border land links with Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania, Serbian public witnesses the stories spun out about Veliki Trnovac as the main hub for trade in narcotics for the Balkans. Many people, however, are not familiar with the fact that the village has several private companies, an elementary school with thousand pupils, Medical Center, post office, dozen stores, inns and cafés as well as a football team. People there do not live any better than in any other place on the “southern railway” (as the Serbian South is known); the situation is somewhat made better by donations from more prosperous cousins – *gastarbeiters* (guest workers) – as testified by a steady direct bus traffic to Switzerland, Germany, Austria, etc.

The people from Veliki Trnovac mostly avoid meeting and talking to Serbs safe for business contacts. One such contact we have used to get connected with Imam and Main Secretary of Muftidom Sevder Bayrami who has kindly accepted to be our interlocutor in the planned interview about the predeath, death and postdeath rites of the Albanians from the South of Serbia as well as our host in the tour of the cemeteries in Veliki Trnovac.² The only condition he stipulated was not to burden our talks about religious issues with the questions about political instability that is spread throughout this part of the Serbian border zone. We have respected that.

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¹ The church was desecrated; it opens its gates only once a year, on June 3, on its patron saint's day when it is attended by Orthodox Serbs from Bujanovac and its vicinity as well as descendants from the former native residents; the religious service is done by Bishop Pahomije and clergy from the Eparchy of Vranje.

² In the village we were received by young Florian Malići (Fig. 1), born in 1998, student of “Mehmet Akif College” (a satellite unit of a Turkish high school). He kindly took us to the home of our informant in Veliki Trnovac with whom we visited the cemeteries; the interview ended in business premises of the private company *Agro Adria* in Bujanovac.

BURIAL CULTURE OF ALBANIANS FROM VELIKI TRNOVAC

As we have already noted, in Veliki Trnovac there are three mosques, namely, Strukarve Mosque (Xhamia e Strukarve), Middle Mosque and New Mosque. In the village there are five cemeteries; two are physically detached from the shrines while three of them are located on their properties. No people of other faiths are buried at the Muslim cemeteries.

Strukarve Cemetery

The oldest of the cemeteries is that of Strukarve; it is located in the *mahala* with the same name, on the eastern side of the village and with about five hundred households. It is said to have originated from as early as the Ottoman Turks' stay in the region. It is surrounded by a local sports stadium as well as sports terrains. Our attention was firstly drawn to a small stone table underneath a hundred years old mulberry tree (Fig. 2). In the case that the rite of *namaz* is not performed in the mosque, the last valediction from the deceased is done on this very spot.

The cemetery is spread over a large area; it is overrun with grass and low shrubbery while earthen paths lead us between plots (Fig.3). To a layman it may seem neglected. Mr. Bayrami, however, explains that the Islam tradition insists on modesty in the appearance of tombs and uniformity in the burial ways. The mounds are, as a rule, not fenced off; the only markers are stone or wooden boards or bars with no inscription or marker (Figs. 4 and 5). Yet, not everyone is likely to observe the order of his faith to avoid stressing his material prosperity in the secular life. Visible are contrasts in the outlook and size of monuments. Thus, for instance, the late married couple from a distinguished family from Trnovac is given special honour by having a tombstone erected and a railing built around their tombs (Fig. 6). Another example is a tombstone with a motive of double-headed eagle (Fig. 7). The general state of the cemetery regarding hygiene is satisfactory: no garbage or food leftovers are there and neither are any candles or parts of utensils otherwise so frequent on Orthodox cemeteries. On a fresh mound we spotted wreaths of fresh and artificial flowers while the older ones had tiny stones strewn on them. Currently there is adaptation of a part of the enclosing wall of three hundred meters in length paid for by the financial donations of the much better-off local people.

The Haji Osman Aga Cemetery

The Trnovac River is a natural borderline between Strukarve Cemetery and the new one located at the very centre of the village and named Haji Osman Aga. It is named after the representative of an old family from Trnovac that built the cemetery on its own property (*vakuf; vaqf*) in order to meet its own needs concerning the burial of the family members.³ It is a century old and has two large areas, namely, old and new cemeteries; it is enclosed by a wall and a gate (Fig. 8). In the old part of the cemetery there are burial places of the family members – cemetery founders which are, above the ground, marked off by a simple stone or tree while in the latest part there are tombs of the local people who used to live in its immediate vicinity. Just like at Strukarve cemetery, care is taken about maintenance of tombs and access paths as well as general hygiene.⁴ On the entire cemetery there is not a single bust or separate family sepulchre.

³ We were explained that Islam cemeteries, anyway, come into being by extending originally small family sepulchers on *vakuf* lands.

⁴ As said by Imam, all the cemeteries are taken care by an employee of the religious community and for this he gets financial compensation along with paid pension and social security costs. Money is obtained from the collections of local people, especially better-off ones.

Our attention is especially attracted to the monuments from the new cemetery section, part of them of white and part of them of black marble with the inscribed name of the deceased and the dates of his birth and death. Those of more recent dates also comprise data about the mourners or those who have erected the monument or verses from the Qur'an (Fig. 9).

We should single out two monuments of special sociological interest. The first one with the name Esma Đeladini on it has been set up by grateful descendents only recently, though the woman died in distant 1947 (Fig. 10). The other one has an epitaph in Arabic; as such, it is unique on the whole cemetery (Fig. 11).

The cemetery's curiosity is a monumental edifice located close to its upper left corner but on the outside. It is decorated with the most expensive marble and granite, with well-ordered greenery, rest benches, night lights and Albanian flag on a high pedestal. This is the monument to Ridvan Ćazimi known as Captain Leshi, member of the Liberation Army for Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa who was killed by Serbian police forces on May, 24, 2001 in an armed conflict with the paramilitary forces from the region.⁵

Cemeteries on the Estates of the Mosques

The remaining three cemeteries are located on the estates of Trnovac mosques. They comprise some twenty graves of the local people who won prominence by their financial contributions to the building of religious edifices or some other gifts and donations for the sake of Islam faith. This way of burial is not looked upon with approval from the local religious leaders; on the contrary, in the talks with the local people, it is openly suggested that they should not follow this example when it comes to choosing the place for their "eternal home."

PREDEATH, DEATH AND POSTDEATH RITES OF ALBANIANS FROM VELIKI TRNOVAC

Our interview with Imam Sevder Bayrami, Main Secretary of Muftidom of the Valley of Preševo, was done on June, 10, 2015, in Bujanovac. He was born in Veliki Trnovac in 1965. As for his education, he is a theologian of Islamic Studies; he earned his diploma at the prestigious University of Islamic Studies in Cairo (Egypt) in 1992. Our interlocutor got familiar with the procedure about predeath, death and postdeath rites; he informed us in detail about the way these rites are observed by Albanians in his native village.

Predeath Rites

A sickness of the member of a wider or narrow family circle is very emotionally experienced; efforts are made to give him all sorts of help, firstly at home and then in the best medical institutions. Day and night watch over his sickbed, whenever it is possible in a separate room, is assigned to mainly younger men (but, if there is no man in the family, the duty is taken over by women). All the inmates encourage the sick man; their nice words are to incite in him hope in recovery and they insist on patience in applying the prescribed therapy. At the most difficult moments the sick man addresses Creator with the following words of prayer, "Ešhedu cu la ilahi illallah, ve ešhedu enne Muhammeden resulullah." Those who are present invite him, on their part, to rely on God and read prayers from Qur'an. In addition to the

⁵ In the year of 2004, at the very center of the village and by the elementary school, a majestic mausoleum to Captain Leshi was erected comprising the things he had worn and those he had used in his lifetime along with the car in which he was killed.

family, the last greetings to the sick man are delivered by his neighbours and other acquaintances that bring him fruit and fruit juices. Also allowed are visits by the people the sick man had previously been in quarrel, all in the hope that in the last moments of his stay in this world all arguments between the quarrelling parties would be resolved. The Muslims do not believe in the propensity of animals to foretell death; neither can it be foretold to an individual in his dreams. Thus, for instance, the rooster's cry does not have any negative connotation; instead, the believers take it to announce the presence of angels.

In his dying moment, the sick man turns towards Quibla just as he does in prayer. In such moments it is not a rarity that the dying man says the pledge to his closest family members that they are obliged to fulfil as well as special desires about what he leaves to the others in terms of his personal possessions and other properties. The relatives surrounding him either give him pardon or ask for the same from him while uttering words of appeasement and comfort. The presence of a clergyman is obligatory. Wailing and crying are not allowed since this is forbidden by Islam faith. Neither is there any special fear of the dead man; the devout Muslims think that the soul of the deceased goes to heaven in order to see the place that it is going to move to. The eyes of the deceased, after his dying, are closed by the family members.

Death Rites

In order to observe all rites and rules, it is customary to have a clergyman in the house of the deceased. *The chair placed at the house entrance is the main marker of a death in the family.* No one puts on black clothes as a sign of mourning; neither is a candle lit. The funeral equipment comprises boards for the interment of the deceased and *céfin* or cloth for wrapping up the body of the deceased. For the funeral, the deceased is prepared by man if he is male or a woman if the deceased is female. The removal of the impurities from the deceased's body is done by water, soap and sponge, while his head is directed towards the west and his legs towards the east; it is done by the family members on the *tereshim* while the act of a ritual religious washing is done by the clergyman. The last valediction is given by kissing the deceased in the forehead and cheeks; then the body is enshrouded in the *céfin* and placed on the *tabut* (stretchers), covered with a special blanket; his head is directed forwards while his body is taken out of the house by the members of his close family circle. The body is not desecrated in any way (such as needle piercing and the like). The personal belongings of the deceased are not kept in the house; they are mainly thrown away; it is also forbidden to put them next to the corpse in the grave. The persons performing the funeral activities should have *avdes* but it happens that this requirement is sometimes not observed. The funeral procession includes only men – relatives, friends and neighbours, with or without *avdes*; women are, according to the Islam teaching, forbidden to attend funeral rites. Together with the procession participants goes Imam without whom the burial could not be carried out (if his absence is justified, then prayers from Qur'an are regularly read by the person who is regarded, of all those present, as the most knowledgeable in the matters of faith). At the head of the procession is a car with the deceased's body. The procession never stops on its way to the cemetery.

The wake over the dead can be done by both men and women; there is no obligation of night watch and keeping of the deceased. The presence of pregnant women during the wake is not forbidden; neither is sleeping in the deceased's home. In the room with a dead man people talk about religious matters and the deceased's moving to the *ahiret*. Care is taken that the dead body is not skipped over. The persons visiting the family members in mourning give *Selam*, usually with phrases like

“God has bestowed *dzennet* on him!” or they read *dova* or prayer for the dead. On that occasion no food or drinks are served. There is no loud crying for the dead though it is not forbidden to shed a tear over his death bed (a dropping tear is believed to express divine mercy).

Before taking the deceased to his grave which is dug by a specially assigned person in the religious community, he is taken to the mosque. The burial act itself is done quickly; on that occasion no special activities are performed; neither is any animal sacrifice offered to the deceased. For woman the grave should be chest-deep while for man waist-deep since women are believed to be more sinful than men. The deceased's body enshrouded in the *ćefin* and with his head turned towards Quibla is only lowered in the pit, directly on earth, with no previous placement in the casket. Before covering it with earth, it is obligatory to put wooden boards over it. After the mound is formed, a prayer is read. Islam does not approve of spilling water over the grave nor putting wreaths over it but this happens sometimes (even if water spilling is practised, the water jug is not broken over the grave; today for the same purpose are plastic jugs used). On the other hand, the soul of the deceased is believed to be floating, from his dying moment to his interment, over his body. Two wooden pyramids (*ba-shlukias*) are put on the mound – one near the head, the other by the legs – with the basic data about the deceased and Islam symbols.

After the funeral is over, in peace and silence do people leave the cemetery. The procession participants are sent home while to the house of the deceased only the family members and the closest relatives go back. In the house it is allowed to consume usual food which is most often brought by kin and friends without caring if it is fat or fat-free. Alcohol is not served. No candles are lit; neither is there any obligation of regular visits to the home of the deceased in the following seven days.

Postdeath Rites

The memory of the dead man, on the part of his inmates, relatives and friends, is related to the prayers that the believers send to God, together with the wishes that God should be merciful to him. The prayers can be sent even without the presence of a clergyman. The mourning for the dead obligatory lasts for three days though it can be prolonged to five to seven days. Islam teaching does not allow for observing any memorials on special days (forty days, fifty-two days, six months, a year, All Souls' Day). It is allowed to organize greater family festivities (wedding and the like) if this is what the family wants. Neither is there any obligation to set up a tombstone; it is sufficient to put a big stone near the head and a smaller one by the legs. The grave is then a matter of care for the family and the gravedigger who is also responsible for the whole cemetery. Devout Muslims do not believe in the return of the deceased's soul to the world of the living.

CONCLUSION

The wars on the former Yugoslavia territory are over but national tensions are still strong. They are reflected, among other things, in the fact that we know less and less about culture and customs of our neighbours. On the territory of the Valley of Preševo where the population of the minority community outnumbers Serbs, no interest is shown in getting familiar with the way of life and religious customs of the first door neighbours. That is why our paper in which we highlight the burial culture of Albanians in Veliki Trnovac is a modest contribution to dispelling of the deep-rooted stereotypes.

The results obtained on site and information from the interview with Imam Sevdar Bayrami, Main Secretary of Muftidom of Preševo Valley lead us to two conclusions:

1. Religious behaviour (predeath, death and postdeath rites) of Albanian population from the largest Bujanovac village point to the preserved spiritual connections with the respective religious community, partly because it is still under control of the traditional opinions of older generations (we have no opportunity to discuss the rite observance with local people and thus check on the statements made by the religious leader), and,

2. New trends in the burial culture (setting up and decorating precious tombstones as a form of deviation from the Islam-prescribed rules concerning the burial of the deceased) reveal weakened ties of younger generations and the Albanian Diaspora with the ancestral faith as well as their gradual yield to the latest fads and demands of modernization.

LITERATURES

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PHOTOGRAPHY



Fig. 1 Researcher with informants on site



Fig. 2. Stone table for performing religious rite



Fig. 3. A view of Strukarve Cemetery



Fig. 4. Characteristics of the oldest tombs



Fig. 5. Characteristic outlook of the tomb by Islam teaching



Fig. 6. Example of the enclosed tomb with tombstones



Fig.7. Tombstone with a double-headed eagle motive

CEMETERIES AND BURIAL CUSTOMS ON THE BORDER



Fig. 8. A view of the Hadji Osman Aga Cemetery at the village centre



Fig. 9. Latest tombstones at the Hadji Osman Aga Cemetery



Fig. 10. Monument built six decades after the death of Esmā Đeladini



Fig. 11. Only tombstone with epitaph in Arabic