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## **The Status of Women in the Region of Golo Brdo, Republic of Albania**

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That part of the region Golo Brdo that today forms part of the Republic of Albania represents in terms of its cultural features part of the cultural tissue of the Debar cultural region of the Republic of Macedonia, which is known in the folk tradition of the local populations as Deborija. Its population is made up of ethnic Macedonians of two religions: Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

In 1913, after the establishment of the state border between Serbia and Albania, the Debar cultural region of Deborija was physically separated, and through an agreement, a part of the Golo Brdo region was incorporated into the territory of Albania. The border separated this region from the main cultural community, on one side, and from the neighboring Albanian-populated areas, which were culturally and economically different, on the other. Thus, the region to a large extent became a culturally isolated space. This cultural isolation of the Golo Brdo region left behind relics folk culture that can still be found today: economic and ethnic identification, in its integral form, as expressed through an emphasized regional identity. There were some attempts to create a "pure Albanian nation" with the aim of annulling this regional identity. During the socialist period, especially during the second sub-period,

the Communist Party (Workers' Party PLA), lead by Enver Hodza, succeeded using the mechanisms of the state institutions to isolate the country, including the region of Golo Brdo, and to impose a totalitarian system of government. In this way, the idea of a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic national identity was revised with the aim of building a unique model of a "pure national Albanian atheistic nation". The implementation of such a "huge ideological project" presupposed the introduction of social and political as well as governmental measures which were independent of the material basis and social and ethnic structure of the population in the Republic of Albania. The newly established mechanisms aimed to initiate a feeling of unity as a basis for the conceptual creation of the nation in terms of the "social cohesion, fraternity of all members of the nation within the framework of the nation, which is perceived through the prism of a family metaphor (...), now it becomes a secular, political form: a unity of fraternized citizens".<sup>1</sup> The American authors Miranda Vickers and James Pettfer, in their book *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, comment on what they found to be a crucial marker in the perception of Albanian society in other Balkan states:

Neighboring Balkan countries (...) summarize their image of how Albanian society functions, and of the Albanian political system, with a simple phrase, the "Albanian pyramid".<sup>2</sup> The reference model is reflected as an 'expression of the role of the clan and the extended family in rural Albanian society, which additionally describes the hierarchical structure in which law is created by the oldest and the most charismatic person.'<sup>3</sup>

This pyramid-like structure of Albanian society was, according to the authors, particularly prevalent during the reign

of Enver Hodza, a type of reign better known as Enverism.<sup>4</sup> The rural community in the time of king Zog I, also known as “the time of Zogoo”,<sup>5</sup> functioned as a stabile institution: it had clearly defined mechanisms for regulating the functioning of village institutions at all levels, as a complete functional ritual, economic, judiciary and executive institution. During this period the state had no established mechanisms through which it could impose itself and control its functioning. One of the most important mechanisms through which the state established a relationship with the institutions of the village and the village community was the payment of tax: “(...) When I was very young, we paid for the old. (...) One fire-place, call it a house, one house would pay for itself (...). We also paid for wool, eggs (...)”<sup>6</sup> Through this mechanism, which belonged to the field of public communication, the following relationship was established: state→*precdnik*→*kefalija* (head of the village). The relationship was complemented at the level of the village and the village community through the institution of *precdnik*, which was located in the regional city center and the village *kefalija*, a person from the local population, a member of the village community. As proof of this relationship, we can use the results of the field investigation performed by Milenko S. Filipovic. In his book *Man Among People* he writes that “the will of the village and the village community as a whole was respected, as well as its decisions”, that is to say that the “village” really had great autonomy.<sup>7</sup> This points to the fact that state institutions did not show a great interest in intervening within the village and its institutions. The village and the village community presented themselves as strong institutions in terms of the preservation of regional identity characteristics. This strongly-emphasized group identification, institutionalized in the village structures as a public manifestation serving

orientation in the symbolic space, argues Dr. Svetieva Aneta, was the result of the “group endogamy according to religious and ethnic affiliation that is still deep-rooted, which is one of the main reasons for the sustainability of the groups in the region”.<sup>8</sup>

The region had a specific way of making a living through *gurbetchistvo*, *pechalba*. This presupposed strictly defined ownership rules which strongly influenced residential relations, since for a large part of the year the male members of the village community, in search of work, mostly as construction workers, chose to work outside the village in the larger Albanian cities, in the cities of the culturally proximate regions (Macedonia, in Yugoslavia) before 1948, or outside the country in countries that were economically more stabile (Greece). As a result of this, the male members of the community worked outside the village, and the villages were occupied by females and males who, due to age, health or for other reasons, were unable to work.

This type of economy did not influence to any large extent the destabilization of the otherwise stabile institution of the village and the village community. This was a result of the high level of flexibility and adaptability of this institution, especially in terms of the culturally different environment. This presupposed a detailed knowledge of the cultural features of the “others”, those not part of the regional identity community. It was especially important to know Albanian customary law in the influential Albanian identity community. Milenko Filipovic’s conclusion also ties in with the cultural adaptation of both communities and the context of the construction of the communication system between the two neighboring communities. He speaks of the specific mode of collective, passive protection of the villages,<sup>9</sup> in which women played an especially important role: “Women were chosen to be village

heads so that the villages would be protected from violence, for Albanians do not hit women (...) Through selection and appointment of women as *kjefajlii* and *kodzobashi*, i.e. heads of the village, the village would be protected from Albanian violence, using the regulations of Albanian customary law, according to which the women enjoys exceptional protection".<sup>10</sup> A woman nominated head of the village had to have a specific individual profile. Decisive features in the selection of a woman and by which she distinguished herself from other women were that "she was as brave as a man",<sup>11</sup> "she was a smart woman who could deal with Turkish authorities and avoid Turkish requests; they could not request from her what they would usually request from a male head of the village",<sup>12</sup> and usually "one of selected older women who were more open, skillful and showed personal bravery".<sup>13</sup> According to the personal memory of the informants recorded during field research in the region of Golo Brdo (Republic of Albania) in 2003, before World War II the dominant principle of customary law was that of age and respect for the older generation, excluding the principle of clan differentiation, as well as prioritizing male members of the community when it came to decision-making. An important role in performing functions important to the village, implemented at the level of the village and the village community, was played by women called *prekorsheni*, women who had the highest status in the household, were of 30-50 years of age, and the eldest in the group of the same category (mother-in-law, the oldest daughter or sister-in-law). A special status was occupied by the social category of women-widows. The presence of widows and of the *prekorsheni* was indispensable when decisions were being made at the level of the village, and this did not depend on the presence or absence of male members of the household:

We call them 'prekorsheni', not very young but also not very old. Women of 30-40 years of age. Yes, 30-50. As far as I remember they could attend the assembly, even though their husbands were not present. Why it was like that here in Golo Brdo? Women went since men were not at home most of the time. Women took care of the house mostly (...).<sup>14</sup>

The large scale ideological socialist project imposed in the region of Golo Brdo, built atop the existing local cultural concept, is an example of the strongly emphasized dichotomy between an idea and its realization: it was often defined in terms of the people's perception as being a good idea but with bad realization. This is surely valid for those segments of the socialist ideological concepts that did not have a realistic basis for local contextualization, but which were imposed by the political system and the state institutions. Since the Golo Brdo region was a peripheral area of Albania, control over the implementation of socialist ideology, viewed from the perspective of the need for systematization, did not run smoothly and did not have a clearly defined form, as in the rest of the country, such as in city centers, where the concentration of political power was great. The use of the mechanisms of the socialist concept in the region of Golo Brdo – seen as a whole as embracing the potentially contextualized and imposed elements that had no basis for contextualization in the local cultural concept – had certain implications regarding traditional life in the region of Golo Brdo that were visible at the level of the village community. During the socialist period the state not only tried to influence the village community but also the smallest sub-systems of society: households. If we analyze the terminology used for the institution of village self-government, we see that the terminology in the spirit of the folk cultural model, characteristic for the Debar cultural zone, was



exchanged during the socialist period with terminology in the spirit of the new socialist ideology, spread using purely Albanian terms that were contextualized in a local form.

The influence of the state, i.e. the Party, was also visible in the incorporation of new party members from the local communities into the existing institution, “obedient persons from the village communities. Aiming to increase control over the village, new institutions were created that controlled the position of women in the village economy, especially in matters of birth rate and abortions within the village community.

The contextualized socialistic model, seen from the aspect of the exclusive position of women at the level of the village and village community, was compatible with the already adopted regional cultural model. The socialist tendency concerning the emancipation of female members of the village community was infiltrated using the mechanisms of the contextualized socialist model that supported the high status of women in the community. The equality of women was also made official through a state socialist law. During the socialist period, the position of women in the village community became obligatory, since, according to the socialist tendency to make women active in the effort of building socialist society, all village women were involved in the socialist village economy. The tendency to make women active in the context of social life was implemented in such a way that certain women were given high village functions, such as secretary in the *lagje* (part of the village), brigadier in the village cooperative etc. With the money a woman received for performing certain tasks within the village and the village community, women’s position and economic independence increased within the framework of the village but also that of the household community.

With the aim of regulating, i.e. controlling, the birth of children and abortions in the village environment, the institution of *mamija*, *mamii*, women responsible for solving female issues in the village, was created. By controlling female issues in a way that was compatible with the requests of the state and the Party, this newly imposed institution had the task of diminishing the regional cultural concept, which was characterized, when it came to female sub-culture, by a form of isolation. This way of solving problems, especially the problem of abortion, did not fit with the manner of solving the same problems according to the local cultural model. This meant that this mechanism of control functioned only on an ideal level, at the level of the socialist environment, and real behavior shows that this cultural segment continued to function under the pressures of the ideals of the socialist community, but in a much more hidden form.

The *mamija* was obliged to assist at births and to control abortions, something strictly forbidden during this period. If a woman had an abortion, and if the *mamija* was informed of it, the woman and the doctor who performed the abortion would be punished with imprisonment. The woman's family was punished according to the socialist model by being proclaimed an "incompatible" member of the socialist community: "If a pregnant woman wanted to abort a baby using a doctor, if this was revealed, both would go to jail. She forbade that. No doctor go to. No cure".<sup>15</sup>

The pregnant woman was free from work in the village cooperative. Women/mothers with many children enjoyed an especially high status: "Enver gave them higher wages for a high number of children. This is why women would give birth, it brought them higher salaries. Even higher retirement since they would retire earlier, as the mothers of many children. Only for the mothers. Nothing for the fathers. My mother was 50

years old, and retired with many children".<sup>16</sup> One of the ways to stimulate natality in the region of Golo Brdo was through state and Party promises of different material incentives, as for example early retirement: "During Enver's time they had many children. He said: 'Give birth so that Albania will grow larger', he said: 'I will give you one cow for twelve children' (...) One does it with pleasure when one is motivated".<sup>17</sup>

Having in mind that the raising of children, especially infants, fell into the domain of female sub-culture – since according to folk rules the mother takes care of children until a certain age – a mother's organizing of her time matched the needs of the children. All women brought their children, whether infants or not, to an institution set up at the level of the village community called *cherde*: "They would make a kind of sheepfold, they would throw them inside and they would keep them there. They would take care of them there, but still it was very bad. They would keep them until lunch, and then take them away. They worked for six hours, but in fact worked five. If you would not work the full number of hours no one would give money. You had to work the full amount. But still, they would work fewer hours. Six hours, until lunch, and then mothers would leave. Women who had children".<sup>18</sup> Mothers had a right to shortened working time, special treatment regarding working hours. The women who took care of the children in the *cherde* were paid higher incentives than those working in the village cooperative:

My mother worked in a 'cherde' where they brought children when they were small. This is how she made her money. There were lots of children, all the mothers from the cooperative would bring their children there. Like to a school. Small children, small beds, in the middle of the village, they left them there in morning and collected them in the evening.

She made their food, everything. Sometimes there were fifteen, sometimes twenty: however many, she would take care of them all. In the morning she started at seven, and the mothers would take them away at seven in the evening. This is how it was. She had a higher salary than those in the cooperative.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of a woman who became a widow, according to the solidarity principle of the contextualized socialist cultural model, and in accordance with the local cultural model, the village community would take care of the widow, such that she was placed in a working position where she got a higher incentive.

## **Conclusion**

The great ideological project that intruded on the living local cultural concept in the region of Golo Brdo in the Republic of Albania was one of the most outstanding examples of the dichotomy between idea and implementation; it was most often understood among the people in terms of being a good idea but with bad realization. This statement is relevant to those segments of the socialist ideological concept that did not find a real basis in the local context and were enforced by the political system and state institutions.

The region of Golo Brdo was a cultural totality inhabited by ethnic Macedonians of both religions: Muslim and Orthodox Christian. In the 1920s the region was divided by the state border between Albania and Yugoslavia (in the Macedonian part).

Because the region of Golo Brdo was a periphery region of Albania, control over the processes of implementation of socialist ideology was weaker and did not take place in a very

crystallized and defined form as compared with other parts of the country, such as the urban centers where the concentration of political power was stronger.

However, the implementation of socialist ideology had great implications for folk life in the region of Golo Brdo, as seen at the level of local village community as well family life. An impressive amorphous structure appeared, simultaneously operating in two different realities: one on an ideal level, the other on the real level. Two parallel processes of individual and group identification started: one related to local traditions, the other related to the socialist state and political ideology. This was a social and cultural way in which the institutions at the level of the village community as well as the family by using the mechanism of social mimicry were able to preserve local cultural concepts while satisfying in full the needs of the state. Research on these institutions has shown that women in the period before socialism carried out most of the important social functions in the village and family. The reason for this can be found in a trait of the local cultural concept characterized by equal sex principles strongly related to the highly important economic institution of *gurbet* and *pechalba* (emigration and work abroad). The cultural and economic concept in which women very often were in a position to make decisions helped them to find an easier way to canalize and contextualize their own positions within the framework of the local socialist concept. The dynamics of the socialist cultural concept in the region of Golo Brdo in Albania has improved the status of women in the sense of providing access to economic independence in terms of the increased possibility of finding employment.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> SMITH D.A., *Nacionalen identitet*, Biblioteka XX vek, 99, Belgrade, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> VIKERS M., PETTIFER J., *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, New York University Press, Washington Square, New York, 1997, p. 10.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1928 Albania became a kingdom under Zog I, the conservative Muslim head of one of the fises and an ex-Prime Minister, but proved unable to resist Italian domination in internal Albanian issues. Thus, in 1939 Mussolini's troops occupied Albania, dismissing Zog's government and annexing the state.
- <sup>6</sup> Archive of Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology (AIEA) in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Safoska Zenepka, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 119.
- <sup>8</sup> SVETIEVA A., *Collection 'Golo Brdo'*, Project *Life in the border*, 2003 (forthcoming).
- <sup>9</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 123.
- <sup>10</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 119.
- <sup>11</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 123.
- <sup>12</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 118.
- <sup>13</sup> Филиповић С. М., *Човек међу људима*, Српска књижевна задруга, Београд, 1991, 123.
- <sup>14</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Cvarkov Veljo, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Suloski Kimet, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Koja Ivan, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Suloski Kimet, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>18</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Koja Ivan, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.
- <sup>19</sup> AIEA in Skopje (Mkd), Informator: Jasharoska Valentina, Project *Life in the border*, 2003.

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