

“Familiar across borders: a study of migration and belonging in post-Ottoman lands (Macedonia and Turkey)”

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Between 1953 and 1966 from 80,000 (according to Yugoslav sources) to 150,000 (according to Turkish sources) Muslims emigrated from communist Yugoslavia to Turkey following the “Independent Migration Agreement” signed between Yugoslavia and Turkey. Although the agreement was signed to enable the reunion of Turkish families whose members had previously been separated, and migrants have been recognized by both states as “returning Turks,” among them were Muslims of different ethnicities, who left Yugoslavia for various reasons, such as religious or political oppression or economic hardship. Many of the migrants’ mother tongues were not Turkish, and many of them did not speak Turkish at all. Some identified themselves as *Turci*, which in Macedonian means “Turks,” because of their “Turkish faith,” whereas others would call themselves as *Makedonci Muslimani* (Macedonians-Muslims), *Torbeši* (Torbešes), or *Arnavuti* (Albanians).

Today, many neighborhoods in Turkish cities are inhabited by people who became “naturalized Turks,” but whose “native land” (Tr.: *memleket*) is outside of the Turkish Republic. Many of them remain connected with their villages and countries of origin, and identify themselves in multiple ways: through referring to their place of birth, imagined homeland, nation-states, or kin. In the case of Muslims whose mother tongue is Macedonian, it was common for some family members to resettle in Turkey, whereas others would stay in Macedonia and take care of the family property. The ties between those who have stayed and those who have left are re-established and nurtured at both a personal level, such as family visits, distant care, or circulation of foods and gifts among relatives and friends, as well as at a more institutionalized level (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999), such as transnational programs and projects established between the Macedonian and Turkish governments or municipalities.

My doctoral dissertation focused on Macedonian-speaking Muslims from what today constitutes the western part of the Republic of North Macedonia, and on different waves of migration to Turkey: the resettlement between 1950s and 1970s and contemporary educational migration and transnational practices. My aim was to explore what serves as a bond for people whose national and ethnic identifications have been flexible and fluid, and whose families have been spatially dispersed over generations of practicing migration. In the post-Ottoman states, the analytical perspectives of ethnicity and nationalism serve as useful concepts to explain existing political and economic hierarchies and divisions, however, they are insufficient to explicate the nuances of collective boundaries (Barth, 1969) that emerge among Muslims from this region and between them and those whom they see as “others.”



Fig.1. Mountains and valleys in western Macedonia

My interest in research on Muslims from western part of Macedonia started in 2006, when, as an undergraduate student of anthropology at the University of Warsaw, I joined my first research trip to Macedonia, and carried out my first ethnographic fieldwork. Nestled among the mountain slopes and green valleys, villages in western part of the Republic of North Macedonia are inhabited by Muslims whose national and ethnic identifications have been flexible and fluid, and whose families have been spatially dispersed over generations of practicing labor migration, *pečalba*. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, political instability and discrimination against Muslims, periods of economic crises and unemployment, and harsh living conditions in the mountains resulted in practicing labor migration as the main way of making a living. After my graduation, I participated in a research project on transnational migration from western Macedonia to northern Italy, which allowed me to pursue fieldwork in both countries, and gave me a deeper understating of the meaning which migration has had for people from this region. A turning point in the formulation of my research question was June 2010, when I joined an international conference in Istanbul, and when I met with some of my interlocutors from Macedonia, as well as their relatives who had resettled in Turkey during the Yugoslav period. I also became aware of the existence of a Macedonian Muslim diaspora, which has been silenced within the literature on migration from Macedonia, whose understanding of the “Macedonian” diaspora has been limited to the Christian migrant population (Svetieva, 2009), as well as of the links between transnational practices in Turkey and Macedonia, different waves of migration to Turkey, and labor emigration of Muslims. The seasonal migration of men separated families for months or even years, and migration to Turkey was seen by many as a chance to migrate “as a family” (*familijarno*).

Between 2011 and 2015, and further in 2018 (with the support of a Sylff grant), I carried out field research in Turkey (predominantly in Istanbul) and I regularly traveled by bus to my field sites in western Macedonia. Because my research was located in different places/spaces and in various contexts (urban and rural settings, various institutions, social media, while travelling) and it was carried out in different periods within six years, it has generated rich data and brought up theoretical and methodological questions which I wanted to address. In November of 2019, as a SRA fellow, I travelled to the University of Toronto to better formulate my research findings and to deepen the theoretical aspects of my doctoral dissertation by discussing my work with Prof. Michael Lambek (supervisor) and other PhD candidates and researchers, by participating in departmental colloquia, and by carrying out extensive library research.



Fig. 2. “Traditional Folk and Music Festival”, Istanbul



Fig. 3. The opening of the “Memory House of Ali Rıza Efendi”, western Macedonia

Throughout my dissertation, I develop the notion of familiarity, which was implicated during my research through references to family, kin, historical consciousness, spatial/emotional proximity, and the process of becoming. My research indicates that “the sense of being familiar” is the main trigger of drawing social boundaries and of group in(ex)clusion, although it encompasses mutually contested narratives of the past, conflicting political views and ethnic/national “identities”. Within the literature, familiarity has been conceptualized predominantly within the prism of the dichotomy between what is strange and what is familiar. As a quality or state on its own, it has been approached rarely and associated with liking. My research argues that although Muslims from Debar and Reka do have a preference for things, people, spaces and experiences regarded as familiar rather than for those which are unknown or strange, emotions and values within the familiar are more nuanced and cannot merely be reduced to “liking” or feeling secure. Familiarity might be associated with dislike, with things considered dangerous or “black” (such as magic), with memories of turbulent times, migration, and suffering, or with shame (*sramota*). The sense of being familiar is created and nurtured through such practices as interactions with the surrounding environment and material objects, preparation and consumption of foods, relationships with family and neighbors, and organization of household and its space.



Fig. 4. Preparing *pita* with nettle

As a Sylff fellow and SRA awardee, I am grateful for having been able to deepen my own work and to expand my academic horizons by carrying out fieldwork and by visiting the University of Toronto, and I am hopeful that my work will make a valuable contribution to anthropological theory.