



Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology
University of Warsaw
k.bielenin@uw.edu.pl

Book review:

Magdalena Lubanska, *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes.*

Studies on Religious (Anti)Syncretism, De Gruyter Open Publishing House 2015, 336 pp.

Muslims And Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes. Studies on Religious (Anti)Syncretism by Magdalena Lubańska is a book summarising her research carried out for many years among the Orthodox Christian and Muslim Pomaks in the Rhodope Mountains of Bulgaria. There, Lubańska conducted in-depth interviews and carried out ethnographic observation about the knowledge regarding neighbours of different religion, their beliefs and religious practices.

This book is part of a current of scholarship in the social sciences of multi-religious and multi-ethnic coexistence. However, it stands out because of its innovative approach and the depth of anthropological analysis as well as reference to rich empirical data. Accurate language, beautiful photographs by Pawlina Carlucci and a glossary of religious terms further enhance the reading experience. Because of length limitations of this review, below I only refer to some aspects, which I found especially inspiring.

The Balkan *komšilik/ komshuluk* was taken up in social science in writing by Tone Bringa (1995), Marcin Lubaś (2011), Karolina Bielenin-Lenczowska (2009) and – especially – the author of this book. In her previous works, Lubańska developed and refined her analytical apparatus (for example

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s), 2015

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor in chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing of this issue: Maciej Falski

Lubanska, 2007a, 2007b). Her point of departure is the word *komşuluk/komshuluk*, of Turkish etymology (Turk. *komşulu*), which is an affirmative term for neighbourhood, meaning both neighbourhood and neighbourliness (see e.g. Lubanska, 2007b). In 1993-1994, Tsvetana Georgieva, a Bulgarian ethnographer, carried out research among the ethnically and religiously varied communities in Bulgaria, where she observed that *komshuluk* can be defined as “a complicated and traditionally managed system of rules relating to ongoing personal and social contact between people belonging to different religious and ethnic groups” (T. Georgieva, 2003, p. 9, in: Lubańska, 2015, p. 66). This system is shared by all members of the community, and its aim is peaceful coexistence.

Neighbourliness is one side of coexistence,¹ which, according to Georgieva, is based on a binary code. On the one hand, it allows to maintain peaceful relations, on the other, it creates ground for conflict (C. Georgieva, 1999, p. 61). According to Lubańska, besides the neighbourliness narration, there are also resentment narrations (reluctantly shared with the ethnographer). These narrations include mutual fears of how a neighbour of different religion would act in a conflict situation or whether their group gained demographic or economic advantage (Lubańska, 2015, p. 77). On everyday basis, *komshuluk* is connected with social exchange, like customary greetings and goodbyes, visiting one another to have coffee or paying more formal visits on important occasions (both happy and sad) as well as showing general hospitality and providing mutual help (for instance, men helping each other to build a house) (Bringa, 1995, pp. 66–73). An important rule of neighbourly coexistence is honouring one another’s religious holidays: visiting one another and exchanging gifts. In this case people in one breath list red Easter eggs presented to Muslims for Easter or *baklava* given to the Orthodox Christians during the Muslim holiday of *Bajram*. What is less certain is how far this neighbourliness extends. As one interlocutor of Lubanska said, “[w]hen it comes to neighbours, *Mohammed allay salaam*² says that neighbours include everyone within the distance of forty houses to the west, east, north, all those people are neighbours” (Lubańska, 2015, p. 62).

Magdalena Lubańska was above all interested in contrasting the practices related to certain beliefs, which could easily be recognized as manifestations

¹ Magdalena Lubańska rightly calls neighbourliness a “strategy,” pointing out that it takes into account the dynamics of social relations, which depend on the present context and require adapting to it (2015, p. 59).

² “Also pronounced as *aley selyam* in the local dialect (Arabic: *wa-‘alayhi al-salam*, literally “peace be upon him”). A religious phrase used when mentioning prophets named in the Qur’an, particularly Muhammad” (original quotation: Lubańska, 2015, p. 62)

of religious syncretism, with their motivations. The author's conclusions are different – that these practices and beliefs are in fact anti-syncretic. She refers to Charles Stewart's and Rosalind Shaw's theory of religious syncretism and relates it to the approach of Aleksander Posern-Zieliński (1987), who proposes to distinct shallow as well as deep syncretism. Shallow or apparent syncretism does not induce salient changes in the belief system. It is "a cultural strategy calculated to maintain an anti-syncretic attitude by protecting religious boundaries from infiltration [...] Motivated by fear or a semi-conscious fascination with the alien sphere of the sacred, such syncretism has nothing to do with treating the other religion as an alternative way to salvation" (Lubańska 2015, p. 301). Shallow syncretism is expressed through such practices as attending shared Muslim and Christian places of worship or using the services offered by specialists of a different religion (hodzhas, medicine men, priests) (Lubańska 2015, pp. 2–3).

Lubańska makes significant input into the understanding of religious narrations and practices by stressing the heterogeneity of Islam among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. The author introduces a distinction between „Adat Islam” and „Salafi Islam”.³ The former is one of the locally practiced models of Islam, or in other words, a mode to articulate Islam in a certain social context (see Varisco, 2005, p. 146). It is, as Lubańska points out, a „lived Islam,” one which is not learned from Koran and the hadisas. In the Balkans, this is an amalgamation formed during the times of the Osman Empire, and shaped by the cultural influence of the Middle East (mainly Egypt, Syria and Iran) as well as of Turkey and local Balkan traditions. The term “Adat Islam” comes from the Turkish word *âdet*, which means “custom,” “habit”. Among practices connected with this kind of Islam, Lubańska lists incubation in Christian Orthodox churches and monasteries as well as some ritual practices associated with the Orthodox calendar. However, according to her, these practices are not, as many authors assume, manifestations of religious syncretism but quite the opposite. They are anti-syncretic, as both Muslims and Orthodox Christians are very protective of the boundaries of their religiosity.

In Bulgaria, besides “Adat Islam,” Lubańska observes “Salafi Islam,”⁴ a religious movement grounded in orthodox Islam, claiming to constitute a

³ Interestingly, the author refers only to Adat Orthodox Christianity. Perhaps in communities visited by Lubańska there are no activists or religious movements aimed at “cleansing” the Orthodox Christianity church of aspects from outside the canon. This is, however, a topic for a separate discussion, one which Lubańska undertakes in another text, where she describes the ambiguity of the term “folk religion” (Lubańska, 2007).

⁴ Salafi Islam should not be equated with Wahhabism, a term which, firstly, generally has negative connotations and, secondly, does not reflect the full ambiguity and specificity of the views and practices of Balkan Muslims (see Lubańska, 2015, p. 111).

return to origins of Islam. Adherents of both models believe their way of practicing religion to be in accordance with the Qura'n and Sunnah, and differences between them are expressed through contrasting the teachings of the old/past and new/present hodzhaz (Lubańska, 2015, pp. 112--113).

This book is an extended edition of Magdalena Lubańska's book published in Polish in 2012 by Warsaw University Press. This is not just a translation, as certain topics have been extensively developed, reflecting the author's train of analytical thought, and her continued reflection on religion. The new edition contains a rethought polemic with Robert M. Hayden, a scholar with whom Magdalena Lubańska personally discussed the issue of "antagonistic tolerance" (see e.g. Hayden, 2002). This kind of tolerance was understood as compelled by necessity associated with fear about power relations set by different communities and referring to situations when people of different religion who visit religious sites are not a sizable minority. During her research in the Rhodope Mountains, Lubańska made no observations which would support this notion.

A different term appears in the reviewed book, one which specifies and further evaluates the notion of *shared shires* – namely the term *agonistic tolerance*. This term was, incidentally, given consideration by Hayden but was eventually dismissed by him in favour of *antagonistic tolerance*. Magdalena Lubańska, however, uses the term *agonistic tolerance* recognising two aspects of coexistence in religiously mixed communities. Namely: 1) agonicity or rivalry between religious groups over prestige and recognition, and, 2) agony, in the sense of a reminder that the religious tolerance developed by coexisting groups should never be taken for granted and, given the wrong geopolitical circumstances, might easily come to an end with disastrous consequences (Lubańska, 2015, p. 140). Lubańska recalls this term considering it

preferable to "antagonistic tolerance" in that it is more inclusive: it does not presuppose a negative affect towards the Other but rather a more general attitude of social actors in a multiconfessional milieu struggling to maintain religious autonomy. Moreover, agonistic relations between religions may also occur between groups which tolerate each other in Mill's sense of "embracing the Other" (Lubańska, 2015, p. 141).

Muslims And Christians In The Bulgarian Rhodopes. Studies On Religious (Anti)Syncretism will be available to the public on an Open Access basis at: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/458709?rskey=oCoEA0>. I strongly recommend it not only to anthropologists and other social studies scholars engaged in religion studies but also to all those interested in multiculturalism of the Balkans and the issue of difficult neighbourhood. It is not only a

highly significant academic work but also makes for engaging and well-written reading.

References

- Bielenin-Lenczowska, K. (2009). Visiting of Christian holy places by Muslims as a strategy of coping with difference. *Anthropological Notebooks*, 15 (3), 27–41.
- Bringa, T. (1995). *Being Muslim the Bosnian way: Identity and community in a Central Bosnian village*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Georgieva, T. (2003). Khristiani i miusulmani w bŭlgarskoto prostranstvo. I. In T. Georgieva & S. Fetvadhieva (Eds.), *Balkanski identichnosti* (Pt. 4). Sofia: Fondatsiia Otvoreno Obshtestvo.
- Georgieva, C. (1999). Coexistence as a system in the everyday life of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria. *Ethnologia Balkanica*, (3), 59–84.
- Hayden, R. M. (2002). Antagonistic tolerance: Competitive sharing of religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans. *Current Anthropology*, 43 (2), 205–231. <http://doi.org/10.1086/338303>
- Lubanska, M. (2007a). Narratives about dissenter neighbours and their place in the cultural strategy of coexistence in the Western Rhodope Region of Bulgaria. *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 11, 15–30.
- Lubanska, M. (2007b). The neighbourhood in the system of coexistence of Muslim-Christian local communities in Rhodopes, Bulgaria. *Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria Nowa*, (31), 237–245.
- Lubańska, M. (2007). Problemy etnograficznych badań nad religijnością. In M. Lubańska (Ed.), *Religijność chrześcijan obrządku wschodniego na pograniczu polsko-ukraińskim* (pp. 7–32). Warsaw: DIG.
- Lubańska, M. (2015). *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes: Studies on religious (anti)syncretism*. Berlin: De Gruyter Open Publishing House.
- Lubaś, M. (2011). *Różnowiercy. Współistnienie międzyreligijne w zachodniomacedońskiej wsi. Studium z zakresu antropologii społeczno-kulturowej*. Kraków: NOMOS.
- Posern-Zieliński, A. (1987). Synkretyzm. I. In Z. Staszczak (Ed.), *Słownik etnologiczny*. Warszawa, Poznań: PWN.
- Varisco, D. M. (2005). *Islam obscured: The rhetoric of anthropological representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Note

The author of the present review and the author of the reviewed work are both employees of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw.