

Karakachans in Bulgaria

The Karakachans are known under different names on the Balkan Peninsula. They are called Karakachans in Bulgaria and Karakachans in Greece. The group itself identifies by a different name. When speaking Karakachan, they call themselves Vlahi (sing. Vlahos), which they translate in Bulgarian as Karakachani (sing. Karakachanin). Upon the mention of the ethnonym Vlahos, Vlahi, they promptly proceed to stress that they are different from the Vlachs and have nothing to do with them. Or, as they say themselves, "we are Vlahi in Karakachan, Karakachani in Bulgarian and Sarakatsani in Greek".

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The Karakachans are not on record in the historical sources. Despite the silence of the Classical and Mediaeval writers, however, most scholars argue that the Karakachans have ancient origins, citing linguistic evidence and certain aspects of their traditional culture and socioeconomic organization. The anthropological characteristics of the Karakachans also classify them as one of the earliest populations on the Balkan Peninsula and Europe.

The origins of the Karakachans have been the subject of broad and permanent interest. Due to the lack of historical sources, there are various hypotheses whose number is significant, contrary to that of the arguments substantiating them. The thesis of Greek origins has two versions: the Karakachans are descendants of ancient nomads who inhabited the mountain regions of Greece in the pre-Classical times; they are descended from sedentary Greek peasants forced to leave their original settlements around the 14th century and to become nomadic shepherds (Georgakkas 1949, Kavadias 1965). Quite a few scholars have been looking for their roots elsewhere, calling their Greek origins into question. They think that Karakachans are descended from autochthonous population of the Balkan Peninsula or, more precisely, from Hellenized Thracians, Illyrians and Moesians. Another theory is also being considered: that the Karakachans are of Turkic origin. This possibility was first discussed back in 1925 and, later, evolved into the thesis that the Karakachans may be the descendants of some of the Mediaeval Turkicspeaking nomadic tribes (Pechenegs, Huzi, Kumans), which invaded the Balkan Peninsula in the 11th to 13th century. Among the variety of scientific hypotheses, the Karakachans' self-perception of their origins should also be taken into account. According to a popular legend, the Karakachans once lived on the Pindus Mountains or in an area called Sirako (Sirakovo, Sarakatsanovo, etc.). Unable to bear the despotic rule of Ali Pasha Tepelene, Lion of Janina, they fled to the mountains where they started raising sheep to support themselves. This legend may be associated with the upheaval in southwestern part of the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th and early 19th century, which also concurred with the resettlement of the Aromanian Vlachs mentioned in Ottoman and earlier sources.

Since there are no sources of information about the Karakachans, not only their origins but also any presumptions about their past before the beginning of the 20th century are purely hypothetical.

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Until the mid-20th century, the Karakachans were scattered in many parts of the Balkan Peninsula (Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, Serbia, Macedonia), but today they live in Greece and Bulgaria only. In Bulgaria, there are compact populations in areas of the Balkan Range (in the city of Sliven, the villages of Samouilovo, Goliama Chochoveni, Borov Dol, the towns of Kotel and Karnobad, the village of Gorno Sahrane, the towns of Kazanluk, Karlovo and Sopot, the villages of Enina, Krun, Shipka and elsewhere), Mt Rila (the towns of Samokov and Doupnitsa), and Northeastern Bulgaria (the towns of Berkovitsa, Vurshets, Montana and Vratsa). It is difficult to establish the exact number of the Karakachans over the years, since they were dispersed across the Balkan Peninsula and migrated in summer and winter. Besides, they are often confused with other population groups, especially with the Aromanian Vlachs, who are also nomadic shepherds. In some cases, politics have also contributed to the confusing figures. The official

statistics on the number of Karakachans in Bulgaria according to the censuses are as follows: in 1905, 6,128; in 1910, 7,251; in 1920, 6,412; in 1956, 2,085; in 1992, 5,144.

The Cultural and Educational Association of Karakachans in Bulgaria claims that they numbered 14,000 - 15,000 in 1994. A 1992 sociological survey estimates the Karakachans at 12,000 to 15,000 people.

Linguists classify the Karakachan dialect as a northern dialect of Modern Greek. Typically, the Karakachan dialect has a larger autochthonous element than other Balkan languages and dialects. Since they are dispersed amidst non-Karakachan communities, the Karakachans speak a second or third language. Bilingualism was typical only of the males in the traditional period, but has tended to expand and, since sedentation, has covered all Karakachans. The foreign-language environment has conserved and impoverished the Karakachan dialect, which has changed under the influence of Bulgarian. At the same time, its use has been tangibly limited too. The 1992 sociological survey found that a sizeable part of the Karakachans speak - but very few write - Greek.

By denomination, the Karakachans are Eastern Orthodox Christians. In the nomadic period, access to churches and priests was difficult since their settlements far from the population centres. Traditional Karakachan culture includes a series of pagan beliefs, rites and customs in unique combination with the Christian worldview and holidays. Since sedentation, they have established permanent contacts with the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The Karakachans generally regard themselves as devout believers, and so do Bulgarian neighbours. The findings of the aforementioned sociological survey disprove this notion. In the course of fieldwork, this writer has established that regardless of their outlook on life, a very broad range of Karakachans abide by the Christian dogmas and church, and that is seen as a distinctive feature of the group's ethnic identification and self-identification (especially before 1989, when the freedom of religion was curtailed).

At the start of the 20th century, the Karakachans were typical nomadic shepherds. They grazed their sheep only on natural pastures which were in different places in the two main seasons, often at a considerable distance. Horses and sheep were of primary importance, since they provided almost all food, clothing, furnishings and transportation. The Karakachan sheep and horse are among the earliest breeds, and are perfectly suited to the nomadic way of life. The main trades of the Karakachans - sheep-breeding and dairy-farming had a series of specific features.

Nomadic sheep-breeding left a mark on the entire material culture of the Karakachans. They did not have permanent and organized temporary summer and winter settlements. The Karakachans lived in kalivia - make-shift huts of branches and foliage. All belongings of any family, be it wealthy or poor, could be loaded on several horses. On the road - where the Karakachans spent a considerable part of the life - they spent the night in a chatoura, a shelter consisting of a rug woven specially for the purpose, stretched on a simple wooden skeleton. Their diet, mostly milk and dairy products, as well as the way of preparing food, was also determined by the Karakachan livelihood and lifestyle. This also applied to the Karakachan clothing, which was one of the major distinctive features that immediately set the group apart: the dark male costume and, in particular, the general silhouette and specific elements of the traditional female costume such as the Typical headgear (a dark red woolen kerchief with loose ends), knitted socks with intricate patterns, rich underskirt gathered at the waist by a broad belt, with a small trapezium-shaped apron at the lower and creating the impression of a low waistline.

The specificity of the social and economic life of the Karakachans was best manifested in the organization of the Karakachans camp (kompania, badjyo, odjak). For the Karakachans, who were scattered among other ethnic groups, the camps were the only territorial communities which were largely independent and isolated from one another, as well as from the other sedentary ethnic populations. The Karakachan camp was a nomadic community which, regardless of the specific aspects of its temporary existence, variable composition and specific dependence on the respective territory, may be compared to the local

(neighbour) community of the sedentary populace. This nomadic community organized the whole economic and social life of the Karakachans prior to their sedentation.

Ethnic self-identification is one of the major community characteristics of the Karakachans. Both as nomads in the past and as sedentes, they have identified as different from the surrounding populace in terms of language, culture and origins. Albeit very conservative, the ethnic self-identity has eventually undergone changes: in the us/them opposition, which is at the core of this self-identity of confrontation has weakened not only because the erstwhile nomads have gradually adopted a sedentary way of life, but also as a result of long-term cohabitation and familiarization. Typically, the Karakachans identify at three levels: identifying as Karakachans, they explain that they are Greeks because Greek is their mother tongue - at that, they consider themselves "the purest of Greeks"; finally, they add that they are "Bulgarian" Karakachans because they live in Bulgaria where their children, they themselves and, in quite a few cases, their ancestors were born.

The features outlined so far identify the Karakachans in Bulgaria as a small ethnic group. Bulgarian ethnologists regard an ethnic group as part of an ethnos living in a foreign-language environment, a part of ethnos that has preserved its language and cultural specificity, as well as its ethnic self-identity, and may also be dispersed. Nomads or sedentes, the Karakachans in Bulgaria fit into this outline, varying to some extent by place of residence. In the traditional period, the latter had three components: places where they spent winter, places where they spend summer, and the roads between them. Unlike the Ottoman age, after the first decades of the 20th century those three components were confined to the territory of a single state, but even then the Karakachans in Bulgaria did not form compact populace. They have remained a dispersed group even after sedentation: they are again scattered in population centres in various parts of the country, but live in compact Karakachan neighbourhoods there.

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The fall of the Ottoman Empire was followed by substantial changes in the sociopolitical system on the Balkan Peninsula, which ultimately limited the nomadic way of life of the Karakachans and led to partial sedentation. These tendencies continued and expanded in the further development of the Karakachans. In the period before the wars of 1912 to 1918, however, the Karakachans preserved their typically nomadic way of life and customs almost intact. Dispersed among the surrounding sedentary population of a different ethnic identity, they led a very isolated way of life in the Karakachan camp, where the economic and social life of the Karakachan families was concentrated. Their existence beyond this camp was impossible, and that ultimately led to sedentation. Contacts with the sedentary population in this period remained confined to the economic sphere and, above all, to trade. This period saw the beginning of the division of the Karakachan ethnic group into two parts: nomadic Karakachans and sedentary Karakachans, who changed their traditional environment and culture as a result of their new way of life and livelihood.

The changes which had started after Bulgaria's 1878 Liberation intensified, influencing the ethnocultural development of the Karakachans after World War I. The Karakachan community changed along with the rest of Bulgarian society. Differentiation within the Karakachan nomadic community intensified, new forms of hired labour appeared, and the individual families became more independent. The Karakachans activated and diversified contacts with the sedentary non-Karakachan populace, as a result of which the different ethnic groups got to know each other better. The intensity of this process varied in the two different parts of Karakachan group - the nomadic and the sedentary, with the latter eventually increasing in number. As Karakachan children started attending Bulgarian schools and men worked on Bulgarian farms and served in the army, more and more Karakachans got to know Bulgarians and their culture from personal experience. Mutual familiarization, the expansion and activation of relations, narrowed the gap between the Karakachans and the Bulgarian population, and that

helped surmount certain prejudices; however, the opposition between "us the Karakachans" and "them, the others, the peasants, the Bulgarians," remained in force.

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Notwithstanding the changes until the 1940s, the majority of Karakachans remained nomads. Still, the process of sedentation as a result of the changes in the Karakachan community itself, as well as in society as a whole, started even after the Liberation. The Bulgarian state directly interfered in this process after World War II (Council of Ministers Decree dated 15 March 1954), binding the Karakachans to settle in a permanent place of residence. Part of the families settled down and took advantage of certain benefits under the decree, such as free acquisition of up to 0.4 hectares of land, privileged purchase of building materials, rent-free tenure of land from the state and forest stock. The 1954 decree changed the life of just one part of the Karakachans, while others remained nomads until the end 50s, when all sheep were confiscated within the national policy of abolishing private property in Bulgaria. Deprived of property, the families had no choice but to settle and look for other jobs. The specificity and problems caused by the sedentation of the Karakachans ensued from the nationalization and collectivization conducted by the ruling communist party, as well as the relatively stronger state pressure.

Sedentation initially caused bitter discontent among the Karakachans, who were furious about their forced settlement and, in particular, about the confiscation of their sheep. They compared the realities of sedentary life with an idyllic pastoral past. In an effort to assert themselves in the new situation, they started considering themselves superior, as nomads and shepherds, to their non-Karakachan neighbours. Over the years, they began making a difference between the two aspects of sedentation. The attitude to permanent settlement and all ensuing conveniences and advantages for the nomads and, in particular, the better prospects for their children, became positive. At that, they were no longer upset about the forcible nature of this settlement, since they realized that giving up the nomadic way of life was inevitable and only a matter of time for each family. Negative attitudes remained only in regard to the confiscation of sheep, which left the Karakachans propertyless as very few of them had anything else. The attitude to the change in the way of life differed from one generation to another, as did the level of adaptation to the new conditions. For the older generation, adapting was a painful and long process due to psychological, professional and language factors; predictably, it was easier for the younger Karakachans. The findings of the empirical sociological survey also indicate a distinctly positive attitude to the end of the nomadic way of life. - 88% of the respondents.

If in the pre-World War II period the majority of Karakachans settled in the countryside, in the 60s they started moving to the towns. Their motives varied: in most cases, the reluctance and incompetence to work the land; the possibility to settle in a group on the outskirts of town, thus forming their own neighbourhood; the better job and education opportunities.

The abandoning of the traditional livelihood and the confiscation of herds destroyed the former social-professional structure of the Karakachans. New social groups and professions developed in their community. For a certain time after settling down, the Karakachans sought employment in agriculture for lack of any other training, working mostly in livestock breeding and forestry. At first, the women stayed at home, raising the children. Karakachan women were also confined to the family because of the language barrier - as they learnt Bulgarian, the traditional division of labour eventually disappeared, and they started going to work. The settled way of life tangibly increased opportunities for education and training, and the range of the professions practised by the Karakachans expanded.

Sedentation brought palpable changes in the life and ethnocultural development of the Karakachans. Their habitation, organization of everyday life and material culture changed as the Karakachans adopted the models of the local Bulgarian population. The hut was replaced by a house, the Karakachan camp by the

neighbourhood, and the natural environment by towns or villages. Still, the Karakachans preserved their specificity foremost in the sphere of spiritual culture, elements of which were activated to serve as distinctive ethnic markers. The changed way of life destroyed the Karakachan nomadic community which, along with the family, played a crucial role in the reproduction of ethnic culture in the nomadic period. Thus ethnic reproduction was wholly confined to the family - the only institution of ethnic socialization in the non-Karakachan environment.

Relations with the surrounding populace changed. The Karakachans were involved in the local structures, contacts became permanent and diversified, the level of familiarization increased. Interaction with the others expanded to all spheres of life and became permanent. The Karakachans became part of the sedentary community, regardless, of whether were in compact groups or dispersed. The abandoning of nomadic sheep-breeding and the associated changes placed the Karakachans in a critical situation as an ethnic community, endangering their very existence as an ethnic group. Under the circumstances, the distinctive ethnic markers manifested in normal conditions, and the mechanism of preserving and transmitting tradition proved insufficient, therefore further ethno-protective mechanisms had to be developed. This was done by the activation and reconsideration of elements of traditional (foremost spiritual) culture, as well as the introduction of new elements. Traditional culture adapted to the new conditions and succeeded in preserving its specific nature by means of a renewal that was adequate to the new situation. The Karakachans preserved their specific ethnic culture by adjusting and renewing, rather than by conserving, their traditional culture.

Sedentation produced palpable changes in the life and ethnocultural development of the Karakachans. The processes of ethnocultural development of the Karakachans were also determined by the totalitarian regime's policy of restricting the activity of ethnic communities. On the other hand, a small and dispersed ethnic group such as the Karakachans is naturally strongly influenced by the ethnic majority. The following factors have been conducive to the integration of the Karakachans into the Bulgarian ethnos: identical religion; long-term contacts and a substantial level of familiarization even in the traditional period; numerical inequality; the end of territorial isolation and substantial loss of the specificity of economic and social life following the sedentation. There were processes of both socioeconomic and cultural integration, but despite the barriers to free expression of ethnic identity in this period, the Karakachans preserved their sense of belonging to their community. They identified language, customs, the concept of common origins, history, etc., as specific distinctive features of their group.

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The post-1989 changes in Bulgaria have been conducive to the raising and settling of a series of issues of the ethnic communities, the Karakachans included. The guaranteed right to non-political association of ethnic communities in Bulgaria led to the establishment in 1991 of a Cultural and Educational Association of Karakachan in Bulgaria, based in Sliven (renamed Federation of the Cultural and Education Associations of Karakachans in Bulgaria in 1995, similarly to the correspondent organization in Greece). The Association of Karakachans set out to achieve the following objectives: establishment of contacts among the Karakachans in the country and abroad; study and promulgation of the history, traditions, language and folklore of the Karakachan community, etc. The Association then proceeded to establish regional associations in population centres with compact Karakachan communities. Fifteen local associations have been established to date, covering the majority of the Karakachans, including those from mixed marriages.

The Karakachans association in Sliven and the central governing body of the Federation organize annual festivals. Along with entertainment, meetings and promotion of the traditional culture of the former nomadic shepherds, these festivals also raise contemporary issues in Bulgaria's Karakachan community,

striving to bring them to the attention of the public not only in Bulgaria, but also in Greece.

After the long restricted expression of ethnic identity, the Karakachan festival has become a venue of its intensive demonstration. The Karakachan community demonstrates its specificity and cohesion precisely at the festivals declaring, at the same time, its ethnic relation to the Greeks. Time will show whether the Karakachan festival will become a forum of all Greek-speakers in Bulgaria. At and apart from the annual festivals, the Association of Karakachans aspires to cooperate actively not only with the Greek federation of Sarakatsani, but also with the executive and legislature in Bulgaria and Greece. The leitmotif of the traditional festivals, as of the general activities of the Federation of Karakachans Associations, is the presentation of the Karakachans as a bridge of cooperation and friendship between two neighbouring Balkan countries - an idea, which translated into particular projects and has prompted some reactions among the Bulgarian public, that minorities are indeed a bridge, but with two-way traffic.

In the ongoing period of radical economic reform and marketization in Bulgaria, the Karakachans have been experiencing a series of hardships. One of the priority economic issues, which the Federation is determined to resolve, is identification for the sheep and horses confiscated in the 50s. Land reform and restitution have also generated among the Karakachans, since they are not entitled to land despite their long length of service at the former cooperative farms and the lack of adequate indemnification for the confiscated animals. In an effort to cope with their economic problems and following the liberalization of travel abroad, the Karakachans have resorted to temporary employment in Greece: in agriculture, building or factories... In the last few years, more and more Karakachans have come to believe that Greek investments in areas with compact Karakachan communities in Bulgaria are preferable to working abroad. As a result of their stay in Greece, the Karakachans have been actively absorbing models of contemporary Greek culture - to a certain extent, at the expense of elements of their own traditional culture and folklore. At the same time, the Karakachans from Bulgaria who spend several months in Greece realize that there are differences in lifestyles and relationships, to which they cannot adapt in certain cases.

The post-1989 changes have generated new tendencies and processes in the Karakachan community. The obstacles to the profession of religion and free expression of ethnic identity have been eventually removed. On the socioeconomic plane, the ongoing processes are in the context of a radical reform, economic crisis and associated immiseration and unemployment, which have necessitated adjustment to the new economic realities. The economic crisis has become a substantial factor for stronger cohesion and sense of belonging to the ethnic group - in an insecure environment, the Karakachans are looking for support in their own ethnic community, from the people with whom they have common origins and a common historical destiny, stereotypes, values, etc. The 1990s have thus seen a certain seclusion and intensification of ethnic prejudices about the others. Yet even in the new socioeconomic and ethnocultural situation, the Karakachans have continued to regard themselves as part of Bulgarian society, and the awareness of their Greek origins has in no way stopped them from identifying Bulgaria as their home country.