

# A Vibrant Community



**M**acedonia has a community of Muslims who speak Macedonian language as their mother tongue. Their ethnic, cultural and religious affiliations are so diverse that it is hard to name a sole feature that would apply to the whole community. There are different ethnic and communal feelings of belonging and identity, and ethnologists are still missing data necessary for reconstructing their collective background and history. But researchers' doubts should not stop us from exploring and admiring the rich cultural heritage of these people and their contributions to Macedonian culture.

Macedonian Muslims traditionally live in western Macedonia, in the Reka region, Debarska Zupa, Drimkol, but also along Albanian and Kosovo borders, in Gora and Golo Brdo regions. They are distinguished

by the beautiful Macedonian language with clean pronunciation and singing with accent – the true gems of the standard literary language, which are nowadays disappearing from its urban variants. Macedonian Muslims are connected with the high mountains and the tradition of sheep breeding. They are master cheese makers, and both white and yellow cheeses from their regions are highly appreciated. Coming from areas rich in wood and stone, they are famous for traditional building and carpentry. As migrant workers, they have been appreciated as builders throughout Western Europe. In Italy one of the most sought after companies restoring historical buildings is owned by a Macedonian Muslim.

The nonpareil culinary skills of Macedonian Muslim pastry chefs and

bakers are a matter of urban legend. From the Ottoman times to the modern post-Yugoslav era, they managed to keep the monopoly over bakeries and pastry shops in the whole Balkan Peninsula. And with the spread of the diasporas they have expanded to the towns in Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Germany. *Burek, gevrek, tulumba, baklava, boza*, ice-cream and pies – these are just some of the culinary delights at which Macedonian Muslims are so good. So a Macedonian traveller feels at home anywhere in the region at central squares and promenades of most towns have a pastry shop or bakery run by our people, Macedonian Muslims, who always address us in a beautiful Macedonian language.

There are different theories of their background and origins, which, of course, then map in various ways on the actual feelings and affiliations in the community. *Torbes* is the traditional name given to the community. It is a colloquial term the origin of which is still being discussed, but the most accepted meaning is “the bag carriers”. There are members of the community who feel disgraced by the use of this term. Others find it neutral. In recent years there has even been a political movement to denominate the whole community *Torbes*, and to enter it under this name in the Preamble to the Macedonian Constitution.

Regarding the origins of Macedonian Muslims, there are discussions as to whether they are descendants of Christian Slavs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman period or whether they are of Turkic origin. During the Ottoman rule religion, and not language, defined social groups, political allegiances and often identity. Thus, in this community there is still a significant majority who declare themselves to be Turks. In some areas they call themselves Albanians. Traditionally the religion has played a more important role than language in

the life of this community, so that there have been more interethnic marriages with Albanian and Turkish and Muslims, than with Macedonians of Orthodox faith. However, one of the most important contemporary socio-political movements within the Macedonian Muslim community pursues the argument that Muslims are part of the Macedonian ethnicity, and that their religion is one aspect of their identity, but not the sole criterion for defining the community.

Another theory sees the origin of *Torbes* in the medieval religious Bogomil movement. Bogomil missionaries carried bags (*torbi*) to hold their books as well as food. According to this theory, the *Torbes* people are the last descendents of Macedonian Bogomils who had converted to Islam.

Some Macedonian Muslims take the name *Torbes* to refer to the long history of wandering and adaptation of their people who had migrated four to five times during their history and had spoken four to five different languages. *Torbes*, then, is the corrupted pronunciation of the Turkish *dört-beş*, meaning “four-five”.

According to some ethnologists, the origins of Muslim Macedonians can be traced back to some Muslim Turkic tribes which settled in the region before it became part of the Ottoman Empire. These Turkish researchers are inclined to link Balkan Muslims more generally with Kuman, Kipchak or Pechenek Turks who had come from Central Asia and adopted Slavic languages. On this interpretation, Macedonian Muslims would be a community of Macedonian-speaking Turks.

Since the historical origin of Macedonian Muslims is still a mystery, it is much better to focus on how they define and identify themselves now and enjoy the rich culture and heritage this group possesses, rather than speculate on who they were in the past.