Abstract

This article shows how collective, public, cultural acts, such as ritual reenactment and virtual discussions about traditional rituals on social media, can enact political subjectivity. The case study concerns the Pomaks, an ethnoreligious minority that is not officially recognized as such in contemporary Bulgaria. Pomaks’ stage performances of a particular moment of their traditional wedding ritual evoke their collective memory of a traumatic past, in which they were prevented from practicing this and other rituals that mark them as culturally distinctive. The goal of Pomak activists is counterhegemonic and transvaluative, aiming to have their group accepted on equal footing with the dominant group. Using the wedding ritual as proof of a historical link, Pomaks have connected with other Slavic speaking Muslims in the Balkans, enacting their belonging in new ways. Their acts on stage and online create a new identity/subjectivity that breaks with the officially accepted story of their culture and origins.

Keywords: enactment, counter-hegemony, Pomaks, Bulgarian Muslims, wedding ritual

Ethnicity is often taken for granted as an identity category: it can seem one is given it as a birthright, and this category rests unchanging for time immemorial. Yet following Fredrik Barth, ethnicity is not a fixed category, but a result of transactions between people (Barth 1969). Ethnicity is enacted when people distinguish themselves from others, for particular goals in particular situations. To uncover the active process of ethnicity-creation, it is instructive to look at a group whose status is contested and murky.

* The editorial board does not necessarily support views and opinions expressed in this text. All responsibility for the article is author’s.
My case study investigates ways that members of the Pomaks, an ethnoreligious minority in contemporary Bulgaria, enact their belonging. I show how their cultural activism helps to enact [bring into being, transact] their group in creative ways, breaking with the standard ways proposed by the Bulgarian government and Bulgarian academia. Activist enactment takes many forms, including: writing and self-publishing books (non-fiction and fiction); creating (non-fiction) videos or photo exhibitions; creating Facebook groups and posting pictures and videos; participating in online discussions; and creating stage performances of folk songs and rituals, including aspects of a traditional wedding ritual. When people who see themselves as Pomaks perform these creative acts, they are producing a new political subjectivity (Isin 2013: 23–24).

Although government actions toward Pomaks varied in different periods, in general throughout the twentieth century the Bulgarian governments attempted to make Pomaks more like Bulgarians, and defined Bulgarians as Christian (Christian heritage) and/or European. Bulgaria’s Muslims may be divided into three groups based upon language and culture: the majority are ethnically Turkish; there is also a small minority of Muslim Roma (around 7 percent of Muslims). The second-largest group of Muslims is Pomaks, or Bulgarian-speaking Muslims; for this group there is not a single name agreed upon by all parties. It is difficult to state the exact number of this population, but according to estimates, Pomaks comprise about 250,000, a fourth of Bulgaria’s Muslim population.

Pomaks occupy an unusual position as an ethnoreligious minority that is not officially recognized as such in Bulgaria. In the period of EU accession (since 1997), both the Turkish and Roma Bulgarians have been officially recognized as minorities as part of the Framework Convention for Protection of National Minorities and have received protections addressing the particular needs of these communities.

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1 Author’s research included five and a half months’ fieldwork with Bulgarian-speaking Muslims in 2012–13, funded by National Council for East European and Eurasian Research (NCEER), American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS), and University of Colorado Graduate Committee on Arts and Humanities; funds provided by NCEER and American Councils were under authority of a Title VIII grant from the U.S. Department of State. Neither NCEER nor American Councils nor the U.S. Government is responsible for the views expressed within this text. Author also completed six weeks’ fieldwork in 2015, funded by sources at the University of Colorado: Graduate Committee on Arts and Humanities, LEAP Associate Professor Growth Grant, and the Eugene M. Kayden Fund. Supplemental fieldwork was performed in 2017 and 2018.

2 Muslims comprise at least 577,139 or 7.8% of total population of 7,364,570, per Natsionalen statisticheski institut, 2011; the exact population of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims is not known, but estimates put it at 200,000–300,000 (Neuburger 2004: 2–3; Todorova 1997: 70–71; Zelengora 2013; Ivanov 2012). Problems with contemporary statistics on religion in Bulgaria include the fact that there is no category for Pomaks in the census and that starting in 1992 some Pomaks identified on the census as Turks; making matters worse, in the 2011 census the question on religion was not mandatory, and 22% of respondents census chose not to answer it; see Ivanov 2012 and Turan 1999.
while the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims have not (Rechel 2008: 2007). Thus, for example, the 2003 State Report on the implementation of the Framework Convention mentions “Muslims whose mother tongue is Bulgarian,” but does not indicate protections offered to them, although it does mention rights and protections granted to all Bulgarian citizens (Republic of Bulgaria 2003). The 2017 report of the Framework Convention mentions neither Pomaks nor Muslims, but it mentions protections granted to Armenians, Jews, Turks, and Roma (Republic of Bulgaria 2017). In general, Bulgaria has failed to grant Pomaks the right to form political parties that represent minority interests, while it has not hindered the growth of nationalist parties that oppose the political participation of minorities (Rechel 2007, 1210). In the 2000s and 2010s Pomaks’ attempts to enter political life as Pomaks have been suppressed by the Bulgarian governments (see e.g. Marinova 2009; Mollov et al 2013; Volonte 2013).

One explanation for the Bulgarian government’s continued lack of recognition of the Pomaks as a distinct ethnic or minority group lies in the Bulgarian government view, firmly established in the twentieth century and continuing to this day, that since the Pomaks are Bulgarians who were Islamicized by the Ottomans, they properly ‘belong’ to the inherently Christian-heritage Bulgarian majority. Another issue is that Pomaks themselves do not agree on what their origins are, or what their group should be called (Benovska-Sabkova 2006; Brunnbauer 1999, 38–9). The group does not clearly fit into the category of a nation, and defining it as an ethnicity is a highly contentious act in contemporary Bulgaria.

Given how contested the Pomak identity group is, and that they lack an obvious marker of cohesion, such as skin color, contiguous territory, or language, the case of the Pomaks allows us to explore not only what properties constitute an ethnic group, but what acts create an ethnic group. How do ethnic groups constitute themselves as meaningful groups, given internal and factors that work against cohesion? Internal factors in this case include great diversity of opinion among Pomaks about who they are, how they came to be, and what kind of group they are, as well as a pervasive cultural climate of shame, secrecy, and mistrust. External factors include a history of lack of access to education, upward mobility, and power; and ongoing hegemony in Bulgarian official culture.

Although Pomaks are not unified in their self-conception, in the past two decades (since about 2007) some Pomak individuals have begun to engage in activism directed at reviving the Pomak identity, working toward positive recognition of their heritage, and acknowledgement of their distinctiveness from mainstream Bulgarian culture. In this article I focus upon the ways that some Pomaks have embraced a particular form of a traditional wedding ritual as emblematic of their distinct heritage. I examine two examples: performances of a particular moment in a tradition-

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3 While the Bulgarian Constitution does not mention minorities, Bulgaria’s ratification of the Council of Europe’s Framework Conversion for the Protection of National Minorities on 7 May 1999 provides tacit recognition that minorities exist in Bulgaria. See Rechel 2007: 1208.
A wedding ritual from the village of Breznitsa, Bulgaria, and discourse about the wedding ritual on various Pomak groups on Facebook. Through these examples I aim to show that performances of rituals like the wedding, and discourse about the wedding, enact Pomak identity and create a new subjectivity. They do so by tapping into collective memory of a traumatic past that unites the Pomaks as culturally distinct, and by imagining a transnational ethnic identity of Slavic speaking Muslims.

**History of Repressions and Pomak Reactions**

The traumatic past of the Pomaks is the key subtext for the performances of Pomak revivalists. The name-changing of the 1960s and 1970s and associated assimilation practices of the Bulgarian Socialist government comprises one of the most important themes in the collective memory of the Pomak community. Starting in the 1950s, the government took a two-pronged approach in which it tried to forcibly assimilate the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, while sporadically encouraging the Turkish-speaking Muslims to emigrate to Turkey. Islamic elements of all the Muslim minorities’ cultures were repressed, and the authorities forbade Pomak costumes, rituals, and folksongs, including many elements of the traditional wedding.

The repression happened as follows, in a nutshell. In 1956 the Politbiuro of the Bulgarian Communist Party issued the first official call to address the issues they saw as associated with the Pomak population. The government proclaimed their “backwards” nature was dragging Bulgaria back into the Ottoman middle ages, and what was needed was an enlightened citizenry that looked to the West for its cultural models. In order to force Muslim Bulgarians to assimilate to the mainstream, the government proposed a wide range of measures in the economic, social and cultural spheres, including electrification, construction of public buildings (such as post offices, schools, libraries, and administrative offices), and education (Gruev and Kal’onski 2008, 26, 62). In 1958 the first attempts were made to forcibly jettison the elements of traditional costume that were deemed incompatible with Bulgarian modernity: for men, the fez or head cloth, for women the headscarf used to cover the face, the overcoat [feredzhe] and the wide Turkish pants. Efforts to forcibly change dress habits continued throughout the first half of the 1960s: People were fined for wearing “old dress,” managers were instructed not to allow women to work unless they were ‘properly’ dressed, and people were not allowed on buses or in stores without the “new,” European style of dress. The forced changing of dress “left an indelible imprint on the collective memory” of Pomaks and led to their greater isolation and the more compact nature of their communities compared to Christian communities (Gruev and Kal’onski 2008: 28).

From the late 1950s through the mid 1970s, the regime’s campaign became one of constant pressure and violence (Gruev and Kal’onski 2008: 26–30). The campaign culminated in a broad program of forced name changing in 1971–73. Along with dress and names, the government attempted to eradicate all visible aspects of
Islamic life, including the circumcision ritual, certain aspects of wedding and burial rituals, certain songs and names within song texts. They forbade not just Muslim or Ottoman elements but all elements which did not coincide with their understanding of Socialist Bulgarian subjectivity. In the case of the wedding, they forbade the traditional bride’s costume. The particular ritual practiced only by Pomaks (but not all Pomaks), the painting and masking of the bride’s face, as well as hennaing of hands, could be practiced only rarely and in secret.

In reaction to the assimilation campaign, many Muslims conformed as part of their daily life; resistance became mostly hidden, and the practice of forbidden rituals went underground; there were sporadic signs of open resistance (Neuburger 2004: 200).

In 1990 the Pomaks received the right to reclaim their Turco-Arabic names which were formerly changed forcibly, an important political victory for them. Nevertheless, during the post-Socialist period (1990–2007) and the period of Bulgaria’s belonging to the European Union (2007 to present), while individuals of Pomak heritage received rights along with all Bulgarian citizens, they had to deal with the underlying hegemony or cultural imperialism of contemporary Bulgarian official and mainstream culture. This cultural hegemony operates upon the unspoken assumption that Bulgarian citizens are essentially Christian and European. While the Bulgarian constitution, adopted in 1991, guarantees the right to religious freedom, it gives priority to Orthodox Christianity, declaring it to be “the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria” (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria 1991). Government institutions and mainstream culture treat the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the “embodiment of national values” (Kalkandjieva 2014: 62). Thus, as in much of Europe, Christianity is assumed to be the foundation of society’s values, morals and culture. This brand of secularism is not an anomaly in Europe, but goes hand in hand with being Western and democratic (Hurd 2008: 5–6). Today one can see many signs of institutionalization of Christianity or Christian-presumptive “secularism” in Bulgarian civil society (see Olson 2017); these range from the presumption that Muslim children will celebrate Christmas, to the lack of examples of Pomak costume and daily life in museums, to the nearly universal bans on headscarves in public educational institutions in Bulgaria.”

Bulgarian culture broadly creates a climate of the invisibility and exclusion of Pomak culture.

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4 I would also point to the Nov. 1 national holiday “The Day of the National Awakeners [Revival Leaders],” reinstated in 1992, which celebrates the “intellectuals” – many of them Orthodox monks or clerics – who led the national movement of “awakening” (or revival) before independence in 1878. The holiday provides continual demonstration of the “sleeping beauty” myth of Bulgarian identity (Sygkelos 2018: 595), according to which Bulgaria “slept” and did not develop under the Ottomans until national consciousness was “awakened” by these national heroes. For the holiday all schools hold assemblies at which students perform poems and other works celebrating these figures; many villages and towns have streets and squares named after these national heroes. Meanwhile, no Muslim heroes of any sort are celebrated on a national (or regional) level in Bulgaria.
Expressions of Islamophobia – irrational fear about Islam – in Bulgarian culture create a climate in which Pomaks continue to distrust authorities and feel unwelcome. Although freedom of religion (or no religion) is protected in the Bulgarian constitution, Islamic practices are being regulated, repressed, and obstructed (see e.g. Metodieva 2014; Zheleva 2007). In contemporary Bulgaria anti-Muslim rhetoric and sentiment also frequently take the form of hate crimes (graffiti and vandalism of mosques), anti-Islamic protests (e.g. Stankov 2011; Plovdiv24.bg 2014), as well as anti-Islamic political rhetoric and policies (Sygkelos 2018). Discrimination against religious minorities is widely acknowledged by external observers of Bulgarian society (e.g. US Dept of State 2016); and is discussed and debated in the Bulgarian popular and academic press (e.g. V’olgi 2012; Ivanova 2013).

This history and present-day situation allows us to contextualize and make better sense of the Pomak revivalist acts in the 2000s–2010s. I argue that public acts of revival of Pomak culture, conducted by Pomaks in the name of Pomaks, are counterhegemonic acts that aim to reverse the historic and ongoing devaluation of their identity. Counter-hegemony develops an alternative point of view in dialectic with the hegemonic norm (Reed 2013: 585 n. 1). Positive and affirmative public displays of Pomak culture by Pomaks counter the hegemonic consensus that the status of “Pomak” is shameful or non-existent. Such acts attempt to establish a new, alternative consensus that Pomak identity is something to be proud of, and that “Pomak” represents a culture and history distinct from the Bulgarian. The movement is still in its early stages, and its terms have not yet become part of broader public discourse. Many of the initiators of these acts would not call them political or subversive. However, there have been attempts to convert the movement into an overtly political movement (evinced in the quickly suppressed attempts of Kamen Burov in 1992, Adrian Palov in 2009 and Efrem Mollov in 2013 to create Pomak political parties; see news.bg 2016). With acts of small and large scope, the actors are performing a new political subjectivity, one could say a Pomak subjectivity; they are showing that the Pomaks are a distinct ethnicity or minority group deserving of particular attention and pride.

**Wedding Performance in Life and on Stage:**

In April, 2013 an amateur folk ensemble of the village of Breznitsa, Bulgaria, performed a staged revival of part of their local wedding ritual. Breznitsa, near Gotse Delchev, is a large village of 3,400 with mostly Muslim (Pomak) population.


The recorded performance was the Breznitsa ensemble’s first enactment on stage of this moment of the wedding tradition. Their performance was more than a spec-

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5 Antonio Gramsci, who developed the term hegemonic, does not himself use the term counter-hegemonic, but Gramscian theorists use this term (Reed 2013, 585 n.1).
tackle that revived the tradition, activating the collective memories of participants. In my estimation, it was an enactment of Pomak culture that tacitly spoke about an uncharted history and underappreciated cultural riches belonging to a distinct ethnic group.

In this video the group of three married (middle-aged) women is singing to the bride an a cappella women’s two-voiced song „Open your eyes, bride.“ The song addresses the bride and tells her she will be moving to a new family, where all relations are called by a different name: „here is your mother, there is your mother-in-law. Here is your father, there is your father-in-law.“ In its inexorable listing of all the equivalent kinship terms for the new family and comparison with the old kinship terms, the song prepares the bride for a new set of relationships that are not familiar, and therefore potentially alienating. In mentioning opening of the eyes, it refers to both a metaphorical and physical reality: the bride’s face is covered with white face cream, with red circles on her cheeks and darkened brows, and decorated with colorful sequins, including over her eyelids. Her veil is made of silver tinsel-like threads attached to a red headband, and her head is covered in a beaded headdress decorated with flowers and covered in a special red scarf. Her face is doubly hidden: painted and veiled by the shiny silver. The bride can only open her eyes with difficulty; she should not look while masked in this way, until this song is sung. In effect, metaphorically, the song commands her to face her new status; its emotional effect is poignant and highly resonant for the local audiences, who still practice patri locality.

The bride’s costume, with embroidered shalvari (wide pants gathered at the ankle), was researched and collected by a local amateur ethnographer, Salih Bukovsky-an, who works full time as an administrator in charge of social assistance in the Mayor’s office. The girl playing the bride was a high school senior and member of the local amateur folk ensemble. The face painting was done by an ensemble member born in the 1960s, who had seen it done as a girl. As was the practice in the 60s and earlier, the bride stands unmoving, with her hands folded and covered with a ritual scarf. A tradition they did not reproduce was the henna ritual: the previous night, the bride’s hands, and those of her female kin (rod), would have been decorated with henna (the fingertips are dipped in henna and dyed dark red).

Both the face-painting and the henna, as well as the traditional costumes depicted here, were forbidden by the Socialist government as part of the forced assimilation policy. As Mehmed Boyukli of Breznitsa recounts it, in his village, after the forced name-changing of 1973 the traditional wedding ritual, including the bridal face-painting, became a private affair, practiced behind closed doors. But soon the government started to press Pomaks to “modernize” by instituting a policy known as “New Everyday Life and Culture” [Nov bit i kultura]. In this vein, the Village Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party introduced a requirement that brides wear a white dress for their weddings. To give this policy teeth, local authorities levied a fine of 200 leva for those who refused. The first bride to marry in a white dress had her wedding in February, 1979, but the couple was fined anyway, because they
did not come out wearing a white dress to dance the horo on the village square, but instead drove away from the mayor’s office in a car, in order to hide the non-traditional white gown from the disapproving public eye. The local party officials wanted people to show publicly that the “New Everyday Life and Culture” policy had been fully accepted by the populace. Subsequent couples publicly wore the white gown for the horo on the village square because they were afraid to incur the fine (Mehmed Boyukli, private communication, 9 August 2019; fieldwork interviews, Breznitsa, 2015).

In interviews in Draginovo village, where they practiced a similar tradition, women discussed how in the mid-1980s, socialist government officials met individually with brides-to-be to pressure them not to wear local traditional garb for their weddings and not to have traditional music at their weddings. The women had to work around these requirements: one, for example, refused to wear the white dress proposed by the officials, because she didn’t like the officials telling her what to do; instead, she wore a red dress. However, subsequent brides adopted the white dress that the officials wanted (Fieldwork interviews, Draginovo, 2012 and 2013).

After the fall of Socialism, as freedom to choose was restored, families in Pomak villages had to decide whether they wanted to revive traditional practices. In most Pomak villages where this tradition was practiced, like Breznitsa, the brides never returned to the bridal face-painting. Only in Ribnovo and Draginovo did families restore the face-painting rituals to practice. In Ribnovo, today white dresses are an anomaly, and most brides undergo the face-painting as part of the main culmination of the wedding ritual, on Sunday. In Draginovo, today, some brides choose to perform the face-painting separately from the main ritual, on Friday night, for photographs in front of the displayed dowry. Brides then wear a white dress for most of the Saturday and Sunday festivities of the wedding. Based upon field observations and interviews, I concluded the residents of Ribnovo had restored and maintained the ritual because it was connected with the local belief system. Specifically, local people say face-painting helps to ensure the successful outcome of the wedding, since it protects against the evil eye; and they say face paint symbolizes the virginity of the bride. In Draginovo, this connection with an older belief system was likely less compelling for brides, but is still present for members of the middle-aged generation – the parents – and these are often the main drivers of the choice to perform the ritual today (field observations and interviews in Breznitsa, Ribnovo, and Draginovo, 2012–2018). These observations show that while brides may have embraced modernization, they did not want to be forced “from above” to change their traditions. The ritual of the face-painting performs an important symbolic function in families and villages where traditional views of the relationship of this world and the Other world are relatively entrenched. For those villages where the local culture was more “open” to other views, there was not a good reason to restore this part of the wedding ritual, although other parts of the traditional ritual, symbolizing the public bonding of the two families and exhibition of social and economic status, are still practiced with great enthusiasm by young and old. In Breznitsa these include the exhibition of the dowry in the home of the bride;
the procession of musicians and relatives from the bride’s to the groom’s home, and from the groom’s home to the bride’s home to collect and “buy” the bride; and the horo on the village square with traditional musicians.

Interviews with young women in contemporary Breznitsa indicated that there was nostalgia for the face-painting tradition associated with grandparents, but young women were not sure they would like to practice it in real life. In general, today there is considerable attention given by brides to the coiffed, polished, and elegant look associated with the European white bridal gown. Nonetheless, young female participants of the ensembles considered acting out the face-painting on the stage to be a wonderful experience and an honor.

The venue for Breznitsa’s performance with the painted bride in 2013 was a regional festival sponsored by a political party which receives solid support in Breznitsa, the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS). DPS purports to represent ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, and runs a yearly series of contests in the performing and visual arts with the goals to “preserve identity, confirming tolerance toward cultural differences in society” and to “increase interest of young people to art and traditions of the ethnicities in Bulgaria” (DPS Bulgaria 2019). DPS’s sponsorship of minority youth folk performance is significant, because it links folk performance and revival with a larger political movement for rights and recognition of ethnic minorities. To be sure, the DPS has not overtly taken up the Pomak cause, and Pomaks disagree about the extent to which it represents their interests. The DPS has not backed the attempts by some Pomaks to gain political representation as Pomaks (Mediapool.bg 2009; Todorov 2013). Nonetheless, at this regional festival, most festival participants were Pomaks, and the festival had the feeling of a safe space for minority cultural exhibition. Breznitsa was not the only group presenting the traditional wedding with face-painting: a high school group from Ablanitsa presented their local bridal face-painting tradition in a similar way. The festival was a competition: in a process established during the Socialist era, the performances were vetted by a jury composed of academic elites, professors and culture professionals, appointed by the government as gatekeepers of the national cultural heritage. None of the jury members were from the Pomak ethnic minority – there are as yet no Pomak professors of ethnography, musicology, or ethnochoreology in Bulgaria. In this case the jury decided to award the groups from Breznitsa a special first prize, created on the spot, for “preserving tradition.” Thus, urban elites comprised the judges for amateur folk arts festivals just as under Socialism, when they tacitly functioned as the arbiters of which village traditions are worth preserving (Olson 2004).

The mainstream cultural gatekeepers (jury at the festival) apparently did not recognize the performance as a political statement, but stamped it as participating in the preservation of Bulgarian national heritage. And indeed, ritual enactment and reenactment have this slippery, paradoxical quality: for each participant the ritual can have different meanings depending upon one’s frame of reference, and all these meanings co-exist, remaining largely unarticulated. Indeed, in interviews, most participants in the Breznitsa ensemble did not speak of any resisting goals.
Some younger participants (in their teens and twenties) used the word “Bulgarianness” [Bulgarskoto] to describe what they are “preserving” (Author’s fieldwork interviews, 2013, 2015, 2017). However, as Engin Isin points out, this is the reason for theorizing “acts” rather than opinions, perceptions, attitudes (2013: 27). Acts can change the status quo in ways that the participants themselves might not be in a position to articulate.

The Breznitsa performance of the painted bride with the “Open your eyes” song has been presented multiple times: once each in 2013, 2014 and 2015 (two of those times, without having a group member play the part of the face-painted bride), and several times afterwards (with face-painting). In 2016 the ensemble split into two (one, the official ensemble of the state-funded cultural center “Narodno Chitalishte Petko Rachev Slaveikov,” and the other an independent group, “Folklorna formatsiia Breznichanki”), and each group presented its own version of the ritual: in July and August, 2017, the “Breznichanki” ensemble headed by Salih Bukovyan won first prize for it at the fifth annual Festival for Wedding Ritual in Peshtera, and performed it for Japanese tourists at a workshop in Breznitsa, while the official ensemble at the village cultural center [chitalishte], headed by Nafie Kosin, presented it at festivals in Dorkovo and Nevestino, and won first prize at the latter.

The organizers themselves do not call these performances political or subversive, but one of the artistic directors, Bukovyan, clearly intends his work to advance the goals of Pomak cultural awareness. In 2013 he was not willing for his work to be misinterpreted as part of “Bulgarian” cultural heritage and refused to perform it at any festival where “it would not be appreciated.” In saying this, Bukovyan referred to the fact that folk festivals in Bulgaria are dominated by nationalistic discourse. Officials routinely praise the preservation and transmission of “Bulgarianness,” and indigenous expressions of Pomak /Muslim culture are welcome only when they are viewed as representations of “ancient Bulgarian folklore” (Author’s recordings and fieldnotes at Bansko festival, 2015, Koprivshtitsa festival, 2015, and Pirin Pee festival 2018). Bukovyan does not accept this designation: for him, wherever it may have originated, the tradition of the painted bride is not Bulgarian. Bukovyan describes Pomak culture as a unique hybrid:

So all of it together: Islam, old traditions, and the reception of new traditions from the majority group, creates a new cocktail, and this new cocktail is the Pomaks. And with time they enrich and develop it, and today we can say … they are an ethnic group already, since their culture is different from the majority. Notwithstanding that they came from the same (Interview with author 27 May 2013).

For Bukovyan and other indigenous revivalists, it is important to acquaint themselves and others with a culture which they regard as their birthright – theirs, but appropriated by a colonizing Other, or forcibly cast aside. That which was thrown out is, by their definition, that which is most valuable, but also most fragile. Their
goal is to tell an alternative story about their much-maligned and disputed ethnic identity (Benovska-Subkova 2006).

Toward the goal to present this distinct part of local heritage, Bukovyan fully embraced academic ethnographic methods, although he has never taken a single class in ethnography. In 2017, Bukovyan considerably extended the performance based upon fieldwork he had recently done. Now it included five scenes. The first showed the ritual of marking “belonging to the tribe”: each woman who brought a gift of a banitsa to the wedding received a red dot between the eyebrows; those with a closer connection received more elaborate dots surrounded by other dots (interview with author, 9 August 2017). A subsequent scene showed the bride acting out “ritual silence,” called “givyane” which in Breznitsa dialect means “goveene” (fasting and also keeping ritual silence). The bride would stand, held across the back by her mother, in her parents’ home, from 11:00 Sunday morning to the end of the afternoon, at which time the groom’s relatives would come to collect her; during this time she would not speak, eat, or drink, and would have closed eyes “to represent that she is not of this world.” Women would visit to see her dress and painted face, and would sing special ritual songs to her; they chose to present on stage the song “Mome, shte ti doida mome/Do vechara” [I will come to you, girl, in the evening] (Bukovyan, interview with author, 9 August 2017).

Bukovyan, like other Pomaks who are practicing reconstruction of rituals or other cultural materials, uses standards and methods of academic culture to reconstruct and perform what was once a common practice. These intellectuals see the past as a prized antique, and use in-depth study, analysis, and reenactment to “preserve” it. A notion of authenticity based upon descendance (Groth 1999) is highly important to the Breznitsa intellectuals: they speak with rancor about Bulgarian non-Muslim professional singers who have “stolen” their local songs and presented them as their own or as “Pirin” (the general region) folklore. Yet, with proper attribution and intention, borrowing is viewed positively: several local singers have themselves borrowed – performed and recorded – songs from their Macedonian Gorani neighbors, whom they consider a brother people. In turn, they are happy to demonstrate their own traditions to Japanese or European tourists, or have an American Balkan singing group learn their songs. It seems the latter is permissible since there is no chance that the Japanese, Europeans, or Americans will misrepresent it as their own culture, and it is positive because it contributes to the global valuation of the Pomak heritage.

In general, the European Union’s stated values have been understood by Pomaks as supporting their desires for recognition – tacit or overt – of their existence as a distinct group. In particular, the EU emphasizes “values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” (article 1a of the Treaty of

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I led the group with which I perform, Planina (based in Denver, Colorado), for a music-learning trip to Breznitsa in July, 2018.
Lisbon, European Union 2007). While Bulgaria prefers not to recognize the minority status of Pomaks, these performances tacitly make the argument that the culture of Pomaks is valuable and connected to a distinct heritage and worldview.

That such wedding performances tacitly refer to Pomak heritage and not just local heritage might be viewed as an exaggeration. Indeed, not all Pomak communities have practiced this tradition historically nor even have familiarity with it (it was practiced in the Lovech region, Blagoevgrad/Gotse Delchev region, and near Velingrad, but not in the central Rhodopes), and some pious Muslims would not welcome it as a representation of their difference, since it is folk and not religious tradition. However, my claim is not that the wedding objectively stands for Pomak unity, but rather that, for those individuals and communities engaging in study and restoration of their folk traditions, aspects of their heritage that distinguish them from mainstream Bulgarian culture can be displayed as a measure of their difference and distinctiveness.

Alternative Intelligentsia, Social Media, and Transvaluation of the Ethnonym “Pomak”

One could frame the staging of this ritual as “revival,” which usually refers to the appropriation of folk material to new, non-folk contexts. For example, we use this term to talk about American folk song revival of the 1960s, or the Russian folk song and dance revival movement of the 1970s to the present (Cantwell 1996; Olson 2004). The goals of revival are related to construction of group identity. Often the revivalist project is oppositional: it implicitly or explicitly situates the constructed identity against some rejected mode of being (Livingston 1999). In other words, it appropriates grassroots culture to make a protest statement against elite culture. Something of that sort is happening here, but the authors of this appropriation are themselves members of the ethnicity whose grassroots culture they are promoting. This case is closer to the type of activist revival that involves an “assertion of indigenous culture following the lifting of former colonial oppression” (Hill and Bithell 2014: 9).

The performance of the wedding song is the work of indigenous activists who are resisting assimilation and enacting their group identity. They do not call themselves activists, there is no organizational structure, no political backing, and no fundraising for cultural Pomak activism. However, these individuals function as activists when they aim to represent their ethnic identity in ways that counter the official narrative of Pomaks as Bulgarians tout court. Activists and their audience constitute an alternative intelligentsia or „intellectual and political entrepreneurs“ (Wimmer 2013: 58). I call them “alternative” because many of these actors do not possess degrees from the formal higher education system, or their training is in a different field from the one in which they are active. While the Bulgarian Socialist governments encouraged secular education to the middle- or high-school level
among the Pomaks, they did not encourage higher education: in 2001, only 0.5 percent of Muslims (including Pomaks and Turks) had achieved a higher education degree, as compared with 8.5 percent of Christians (Broun 2007: 119). Pomaks did not have an established presence in universities, and did not help to produce the discourse of history and literature of the group. Or rather, few stray individuals did so; these often made their careers as Bulgarians (after having changed their names), not as Pomaks; generally, they did not claim publicly a Pomak identity and did not challenge mainstream discourse from a Pomak point of view.

The discourse of today’s Pomak counterpublic is distinct from mainstream Bulgarian culture, and often aims to address and reverse hegemony. It includes social media groups with Pomak or Islamic themes. Some of these groups have a semiprivate character, with content regulated by a moderator, such as „closed“ Pomak-themed groups on Facebook. Since the resulting public is largely composed of in-group members, members of this disempowered group can feel maximally empowered; individuals have reason to expect that they will be heard and their voice will matter.

One of the most important counter-hegemonic acts that is being performed daily by the Pomak intelligentsia is the transvaluation of the highly contested term they are choosing to represent their ethnicity, “Pomak.” Andreas Wimmer characterizes such acts as the intent „to challenge the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories … [by establishing] moral and political equality… with regard to the dominant group“ (2013: 57). Wimmer advocates a slightly modified version of Barth’s approach to ethnicity. He introduces dynamism into the boundary metaphor for which Barth was famous, and asks not only how ethnic boundaries are reproduced and why they remain stable, but also how they are made and unmade, through political movements or the everyday acts of individuals (2013: 45). To quote Wimmer, we should ask „how actors struggle over which social boundaries should be considered relevant and what the consequences of being an X versus being a Y should entail.” (Wimmer 2013: 4). This approach fits well the case of the Pomaks due to the highly contested and fluctuating nature of this boundary.

Much of the cultural rehabilitation work done by Pomaks is not framed explicitly as part of an ethnoreligious movement; the movement has no agreed-upon name (although I have heard “Pomak Spring” used). The work varies greatly in terms of its politicization. I argue that, whether intentionally politicized or not, the work of constructing ethnic difference is political and performative in that it is an enactment that aims to affect the broader social reality.

The Pomaks’ use of the World Wide Web began in 2007, with the creation of Pomak.eu, an online forum. From 2007 to 2018 there were 84,376 posts to this forum; 94 percent were in Bulgarian language, while others were in Turkish or English. The topics covered included politics, news, history, language, religion, culture (dress, literature, videos, folklore, music, etc.). In 2018, this forum had 8149 members, although it was no longer very active, getting from 0 – 5 posts a day. With the rise of cell phones, social networks have taken the place of online fora. Numerous pages on
Facebook, the sharing method of choice for adults in Bulgaria, are active on a daily basis. The following chart shows the major Facebook groups, their status as open, closed, or secret, and their membership numbers in 2013 and 2018:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of members, 2013</th>
<th>Number of members, 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pomak Soul (pomashka dusha)</td>
<td>16,132 (closed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomak.bg</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>459 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evropomak (Europomak)</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>419 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomak-European Institute</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>3198 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomashka muzika</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>2009 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a Pomak and I like people to call me that/ Az s”m pomak i kharesvam da me narichat taka! Proud to be a pomak!</td>
<td>1118 (closed)</td>
<td>3580 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditsii, kultura i istoria na pomatsi, torbesi I gorani</td>
<td>806</td>
<td>1724 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edinstvo za pomatsi turtsi gorani</td>
<td>3750</td>
<td>5974 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumelija torbeski kulturno-naucen centar</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>2570 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomak Culture &amp; Arts</td>
<td>2028</td>
<td>2275 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomatsite-traditsiite ot vekovete</td>
<td></td>
<td>1053 (closed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomashki novini + News + Pomak Haberler</td>
<td></td>
<td>4245 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomashki svatbi</td>
<td></td>
<td>9725 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicheska partiia pomak</td>
<td></td>
<td>261 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomakia</td>
<td></td>
<td>899 (public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomaknews Agency</td>
<td></td>
<td>1646 (Public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pomakiska Institutet</td>
<td></td>
<td>408 (Public)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several of these groups are ethnic consciousness-raising groups; for example, this is the express purpose of „I am a Pomak and I like people to call me that.“[

7 Facebook group founded by Nezir Pachedji in late 2011.
Statements such as the latter represent an intentional transvaluation of the term Pomak, similar to the Queer movement’s reclamation of “queer,” which was formerly used as a pejorative term for an effeminate man, but was refashioned to refer to non-normative heterosexuality (Jagose 1997: 72–4). Here reclaiming a former insult meant fashioning a new concept which was broader than the meaning of the pejorative term. In the case of the Pomaks, too, the term’s meaning became broader; formerly it was one of several ethnonyms used to refer to various regional populations of Slavic-speaking Muslims (Raichevsky 2014: 9). “Pomak” has been adopted as the preferred term for many. Thus, through the creation and maintenance of Pomak-focused social media groups, the activists and followers are enacting Pomak identity in ways that break with established practice in Bulgarian official and scholarly culture (Isin 2013).

**Enacting Shared Heritage**

It is largely on social media that Pomak identity is being imagined and performed as a transnational ethnic identity. Slavic-speaking Muslims from southern Bulgaria and from the Lovech/Teteven region in northern Bulgaria, from Northern Greece and from European and Asiatic Turkey, as well as those from the Gora and Jupa regions of Kosova, Albania, and Macedonia, are creating a shared culture, history, and discourse. A number of Muslim communities in these areas have collective memories of traditions of bridal face-painting, or still practice these traditions in modified form. Several have revived older traditions for stage performances. The striking similarity in bridal facial painting has been one of the reasons members of these communities have presumed a close historical connection among themselves.

As is common with traditional practices, in Bulgaria neither community members nor scholars seem to have a good theory for the specific historical origins of this face-painting practice, but a review of available sources can show that these bridal face painting rituals are distinct from surrounding traditions. Several aspects of the Pomak wedding ritual and the wedding costume are held in common by Slavic and Turkic peoples, but not face-painting. The henna, the red veil (and other special, symbolically colored veils), the covering of the bride’s entire face with a cloth, and the head-dress are part of the customs of Turkic peoples (Andrews 1991). Like the Pomak brides, Turkic brides did use a headdress framed in

*Figure 1 „Pomak National Identity“ photo of bride from village of Ribnovo, Bulgaria, featured in Website “Who are the Pomaks”*
coins and metallic chains hanging down over the bride’s face, apparently to ward off lightning; this was somewhat similar to the tinsel veil used by modern Pomaks (Andrews 1991: 90–92). Head covering, veiling, wreaths and flower garlands were also common to Slavic brides (Sumtsov 1993), but Christian Slavs did not practice bridal face-painting, and the tradition appears not to exist in Bulgaria or other Slavic nations except in Pomak villages (e.g. Vasileva 1993: 133; Sumtsov 1996 [1881, 1885]: 68–74, 124; Arnaudov 1931: 138–148; Karamikhova 1993). The geographically closest bridal face painting is done in Iran, Afghanistan, India, and among the Berbers of North Africa (Azade Vatanpour, personal communication, 2016; DeMello 2012). Several other areas of the world use face-painting to mark the status of an individual undergoing an initiation ritual (DeMello 2012).

Pomaks themselves have shown significant interest in the origins of this tradition. In several discussions on social media, participants pointed out the close similarity between their traditions and those from other Slavic-speaking Muslims in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. In a discussion on the web forum Pomak.eu from 2009–2012, participants contributed evidence that Bulgarian Turks used decorative decals on the bride’s face (the evidence was a photo of a Bulgarian Turkish bride from Razgrad in the 1950s, and a grandson’s retelling of his grandmother’s observations from Varna area of Eastern Bulgaria) (“Ribnovska svatba,” Pomak.eu, posts 6 November 2010 and 17 June, 2012). These were likely Alevi Turks; ethnographies of the Razgrad region show that among these Muslims (whose beliefs and practices lie on the periphery of Shia Islam, Procházka-Eisl 2016) the forehead of the bride was decorated either with dots or with figures made of foil and sequins; the brows were darkened and connected; and the head coverings (small fez with coins, several different headscarves in a particular order) are similar to those used by Pomaks (Georgieva 1991: 49, 126–27).

However, in this and other discussions participants noted that the closest matches to the Pomak face-painting traditions, which feature full-fledged facial painting and not just decals or dots, are from the Gorani/Torbeshi Slavic-speaking Muslims in Kosova, Macedonia, and Albania (“Ribnovska svatba,” Pomak.eu, post 13 July 2009; “LJUBINJSKA NUSA-NEVJESTA,” Naucno-etnoloski Institut Torbe-
Discussions about the wedding and other folkloric similarities led intellectual leaders of the Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Kosovo communities to make connections between themselves, both online and in person. In 2008, through the online forum pomak.eu, Mehmed Boyukli, unofficial historian and amateur video-maker of Breznitsa, Bulgaria, became acquainted with Serif Ajradinoski, of Podgorci, Macedonia, who was deeply interested in Torbesh history and culture, and later wrote and published the *Torbeshka Deklaracija* (2011). This Declaration argues for official recognition of the Torbesh minority in Macedonia, official counting of the Torbesh minority in the census, and affirmation of the Torbesh culture and history so as to put an end to their marginalization, assimilation, and emigration (2011). During online conversations and subsequent visits (2008–2017) Ajradinoski and Boyukli discovered great similarity between the Pomak and Torbesh people’s wedding traditions and other folklore traditions. Their connection on the internet forum gave rise to many cultural connections and exchanges between the musicians and intellectuals of Breznitsa, and intellectuals, musicians, journalists, and scholars from Macedonia and Kosovo. Inspired by this connection, in 2015 Boyukli created a video compilation (https://youtu.be/NiB02Yf4hsI) with old photographs of the traditional wedding from Breznitsa set to recordings of three local wedding songs, and published it online to several of the groups devoted to the connection between the Pomaks and the Torbesh people, to show the lost ritual and the similarities between cultures (“Izgubenata Breznitsa” album 2010 and Naucno-etnoloski Institut Torbesa Zupe, Gore i Podgora, Feb 20, 2015). Boyukli theorizes that there used to be many cultural connections between these communities of Slavic-speaking Muslims due to trade routes in the Balkans. Prior to national boundaries being put into place (in the post-Ottoman period), the Slavic-speaking Muslims freely associated with each other, and songs and other traditions traveled from one place to another (Boyukli, interview with author, 27 July 2017).

These online discussions and videos constitute counterhegemonic discourse as they directly contradict the arguments of scholars in Bulgaria. In the socialist as well as the post-socialist period, Bulgarian ethnographers have downplayed the distinctiveness of Pomak folk traditions, and emphasize their traditional rituals are thoroughly Bulgarian and Slavic, with likely pre-Christian origins (Kaufman 1965: 44; Vekilova and Minkova 2009: 291–93; Seyppel 1989). Contemporary Bulgarian commentators tend to gloss over the face-painting aspect of the wedding, and either emphasize the similarities with other Slavic practices (Toncheva 2001: 136) or the idiosyncratic nature of the practice (Karamikhova 1993) without delving into connections with other peoples. Bulgarian scholars typically say the Slavic-speaking Muslims, whose communities have historically been oriented toward conservatism and adherence to tradition (due to livelihood, geography, and religion), have preserved Slavic pre-Christian practices later than the Christian Bulgarians (e.g. Veleva 1969, Krusteva-Nozharova 1969: 147; Khadzhinikolov 1958: 3). In this way
scholars spread the thesis that the Pomaks play the role of culture-bearers for the Bulgarian nation.

Under Socialism, and even continuing afterwards, Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks) have been faced with the self-contradictory thesis that their culture was thoroughly Slavic and Bulgarian, yet essential elements of it were backward; thus, it should be preserved only selectively, as a museum exhibit, a relic of a difficult history. Pomak activists have tacitly accepted this thesis by pursuing preservation of their culture, but have also challenged it by working toward an alternative thesis of Pomak distinctiveness and unity with other Muslim Slavs.

The political goal to culturally and virtually unite Slavic-speaking Muslims in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosova, Greece, and Turkey is manifest in groups such as “Naucno-etnoloski Institut Zupe, Gore i Podgora” [Scholarly Ethnological Institute of the Torbesh people of the Zhupa, Gora, and Podgora regions], “Breznitsa,” [village of Breznitsa], “Помаците – традициите от вековете” [Pomaks – Age-old Traditions] and “Аз съм помак и харесвам да ме наричат така!” [I am a Pomak and I want people to call me that]. For some, the goal extends to overt political activism, but the acts described here are not connected with political campaigns. Neither are they part of any presumed campaign for the Pomaks to unite and form a separate nation – such a goal is almost never expressed by the participants themselves, although they are often accused of “separatism” by members of opposing ideological groups, such as Bulgarian nationalists and Druzhba Rodina. The goal of the Pomak activists is primarily counterhegemonic and transvaluative, aimed at changing “the normative principles of stratified ethnic systems,” so that their group would accepted on equal footing with the dominant group in each nation – similar to the early civil rights movement in the US under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Wimmer 2013: 57). To be clear, the individual Pomak activists themselves typically do not see themselves as activists and may not be aware of being part of a movement.

Pomak activists have been using the Pomak wedding as an emblem for their unity and a symbol of the Pomak identity. Participants on social media regularly post pictures and videos of Pomak weddings, including in a group called “Pomashki svatbi” (Pomak weddings). To be sure, only a small percentage of posts feature the face-painting ritual; others feature other key moments from contemporary Pomak weddings, such as the couple standing in front of the girl’s dowry or in their newly furnished bedroom, the round dance on the village square, or the procession from the girl’s home to the boy’s home—moments which signify the wedding’s main meanings for the individuals and within the community, the shift in status and/or community unification. Such ritual moments inevitably show a mix of traditional

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8 Rodina Fraternity [Druzhba Rodina] is and was a Pomak modernization organization, founded in Smolyan in 1937 and revived in 2009. Although the Rodina Fraternity was proclaimed a Fascist organization and was eradicated by 1947, many of its goals and policies for Pomak assimilation were adopted by the socialist regime. Since its official revival in 2009, it has remained active in political and cultural arenas (Neuberger 2004: 44–47; Ivanova 2002: 25–36; Gruyev and Kal’onski 2008: 19).
and modern elements: for example, while the bride wears a European style white bridal dress, the guests (particularly middle-aged women) may wear contemporary versions of local traditional dress. The bride’s dowry, too, often contains many pieces of bed-linen or women’s dress that are contemporary versions of traditional items. The horo on the village square often shows people in a mix of traditional and modern urban clothing doing traditional dance steps to traditional songs performed with modern synthesizer accompaniment.

When photos of the bridal face-painting tradition are posted (from actual weddings in Draginovo or Ribnovo, or from reenactments), typically the posters are members of the Pomak alternative intelligentsia, who clearly value precisely this moment of the wedding. These materials tend to attract a lot of discussion: reactions range from enthusiastic approbation to disapproval. Many compliment the bride and groom for reviving old traditions: “Everything’s coming around to the old times it’s beautiful Mashallah to that bride.” A few criticize the posts, claiming this is exotic and does not represent all Pomaks: “I am from Madan but have never seen such a thing. And I am 62 years old. Such a tradition I haven’t seen Mashallah you can’t see the face of the bride that is unheard of it’s kind of scary Mashallah.” Another post disapproved of the ritual on religious grounds: “those are pagan rituals from Thracian and Protobulgarian times but in the Sunna [authoritative writings followed by Sunni Muslims] there are no such things, Praise be to God!”

The range of opinions suggests the current lack of ideological unity in Pomak communities. A new source of opinions and authorities is the global Islamic revival movement, which has active participants in these regions (Ghodsee 2010; Olson 2017). This diversity is not unusual in any community, and is particularly evident in early stages of consciousness-raising movements; it also speaks to the ideological and cultural diversity of Pomaks themselves. While all Pomak communities have in common their Muslim heritage and their native language belonging to the Slavic group, there are great differences of opinion about the name of the ethno-confessional group, its history and origins, the desired level of assimilation into mainstream Bulgarian culture, and the desired level of Muslim practice (Ivanova et al 2011; Benovska-Subkova 2006). Of course, opinions, identities, and desires on such issues can and do vary even for a single individual over a short period of time or over a lifetime (Benovska-Subkova 2006).

9 “Bsicko se zavrcta na staroto vreme tova e hubavo macallah na tai nevesta” “Pomachka bylka!” post on Facebook group “Pomashka Dusha” in response to photo of face-painted bride from village of Draginovo, 10 December 2017.

10 “Аз съм от Мадан но таково чудо не съм виждала, а съм на 62 год. Такава традиция не съм виждала машила лицето на момичето не се вижда какво е тва чудо човек може да се оплаши машила.” “Pomachka bylka!” post on Facebook group “Pomashka Dusha” in response to photo of bride from village of Draginovo, 10 December 2017.

11 “towa sa ezicheski obichai oshte ot wremeto na traki i prablygari no w suneta takiva raboti nema elhamdulilllah” Post on personal Facebook page of moderator of one of Pomak groups, in response to post of photo of face-painted bride from village of Ribnovo, 23 November 2016.
The expressed diversity of opinions in contemporary Pomak social media groups may be read a sign of the broadening of the movement. No longer are intellectuals only speaking only to other intellectuals. The lack of proper spelling and grammar (punctuation) in some of the quoted posts suggests that a broad swath of Pomaks is reading and reacting to them. The group Pomak Soul, where some of these posts appeared, is the largest Pomak group currently, with 17,500 participants in 2019 – more than twice the number of participants in the online forum that initiated the Pomak social media movement, pomak.eu.12

In all of these forums, the moderators play an important role, as they both protect participants from infiltration from hostile forces, and also educate the participants. Bulgarian nationalists apparently regularly try to infiltrate these forums. Several participants told me that in the 2000s they had been threatened by representatives of the Bulgarian security agency, DANS, for their participation, and were told not to continue with online forums. Apparently, this kind of threat is not happening currently, and moderators take care to prevent political discussion. Moderators also make sure participants are tolerant of cultural differences. It is not immediately obvious to many participants which aspects of Pomak culture are unique and “worth saving,” and which are not. The moderators interpret this for them. To the woman from Madan, the group leader responded:

*The sad and horrible thing is that you are also from the Rhodopes and you don’t have even the slightest understanding of what people live near you. Madan and [Draginovo] are not on opposite poles of the earth. I ask you to have respect for our traditions!!! … It’s your right to not accept these traditions, but they exist, they are performed and are very authentic, [as] they have remained from ancient times.* … 13

Using the term “our” and naming villages in two different regions, the discussion moderator implies the underlying unity of the Pomaks despite the fact that they have been divided by historical forces and discouraged from thinking of themselves as belonging to one group. Other posts by alternative intellectuals emphasize that the Bulgarian academy has not adequately studied these traditions: in 2009 on a forum in pomak.eu, one participant wrote that they were dissatisfied with the lack of a definite opinion on the origins of the tradition, expressed by a Bulgarian ethnographer: “Come on friends, there’s no Communism anymore! … Let the world’s

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12 Pomak Soul was founded by Sabetka Spahieva in 2014 as ПОМАЦИ, ТОРБЕШИ, ГОРАНИ – POMAKLAR, TORBEŞLER, GORANLAR🌹

13 „Жалкото и ужасното е, че Вие също сте от Родопите и нямате ни най- малка представа какви хора живеят в близост до Вас. Мадан и [Драгиново] не са на двата различни земни полюса. Моля Ви да проявявате уважение към традициите ни!!! … Ваше право е да не приемате тези традиции, но те съществуват, изпълняват се и са много автентични, останали от древността…. “Pomachka bylka!” post on Facebook group “Pomashka Dusha” in response to photo of bride from village of Draganovo, 10 December 2017.
ethnographers, historians and specialists give their opinions about the origins of this unique Pomak tradition from Bulgaria.”

Thus, in the face of what some deem as inadequate study by the Bulgarian academic establishment, alternative intellectuals are taking matters into their own hands and curating images for their online followers, as well as planning and designing performances to acquaint audiences with their “unique” traditions.

Such sharing, although it might seem superficial, is part of the discourse that helps to build relationships among the various territorially divided individuals and communities, and creates imagined communities (Anderson 1991 [1983]), virtual neighborhoods (Appadurai 1996), or structures of belonging. Claiming one’s relationship with the central symbol – the veiled and painted bride (or on some sites, any bride of the target ethnicity) – through liking, commenting, posting or reposting indicates that one belongs to this loosely defined ethnic/national group. For members of the group, the symbol becomes fraught with emotion, what Montserrat Guibernau calls “sentimental meaning”: “emotional identification with a symbol beyond cognitive definitions and historical explanations of its origin and intent” (2013: 93).

Conclusion

Mehmed Boyukli’s comments on the song “Open your eyes,” expressed in his 2010 album “Lost Breznitsa” [Izgubenata Breznitsa], are indicative of the symbolic significance of the performative wedding for Pomaks: “This song is not only a ritual song, it embodies the pain and joy of every mother who says farewell to her daughter, transferring her to the hearth of the groom and his parents. This act signifies the legitimation of the new family as the basic social institution, in which [the bride] would feel herself as significant in the new milieu.” His words remind us that the song and ritual are performative of the new social standing not only of a bride, but also, now, of the Pomaks, as they begin to reach for full legitimation as a named group (minority) within Bulgarian society.

The acts described here may not seem revolutionary: the revived and performed wedding could be viewed as just another museum piece, a variant of the traditional wedding of Slavic-speaking Bulgarians. But as I have tried to show, the historical and contemporary ideological context in which Pomaks were denied agency

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14 “Много вероятно е това да си е чисто тяхна традиция. Начин, по който да изразят себе си,“ казва Маргарита Карамихова, професор в Етнографския институт към Българската академия на науките.
in matters of cultural determination, means that today’s acts of self-representation become endowed with significance. The particular individuals doing the stage performances may not agree on exactly what they are doing or why. For younger and/or less politically engaged participants, this is a fun activity that is fulfilling for nostalgic reasons: grandmother did it this way. They may have heard about an understanding of ancient “Bulgarianess” and want to contribute to it, or they may understand the distinctiveness of this as a tradition of Muslims only. For their participation, they receive medals, the chance to travel, and fame; their family, friends, and village are proud of their achievements. For alternative intellectuals, these performances are a chance to perform historiography or ethnography along with official intellectuals, and receive honor, respect, and recognition for it. That one’s village is deemed a “wellspring” [izvor] of folklore brings pride and fame to the village, and tells a story about Pomaks having a history and culture of which they are not ashamed.

From pride in one’s village culture to pride at being a Pomak is a step which might not happen for each individual. But the participants do not have to articulate their own pride as Pomaks in order for their acts to contribute to Pomak subjectivity. My argument is that, in the context of a history of repression and collective trauma, and a post-Socialist shift in the discourse around Pomak identity, these performances enact Pomak subjectivity. The distinctiveness of the painted bride has become a rallying point for some Pomaks. On videos and internet posts, the visual similarity between the painted brides virtually connects enclaves of Slavic-speaking Muslims. Whether or not the participants are conscious of this, these acts – performances, videos, and posts – are counter-hegemonic as they counter the official understanding of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims as indistinguishable from Bulgarians of Christian heritage. In this context, diversity of opinion among Pomaks is not a flaw in a movement, but a sign that the movement is gaining in diversity and popularity. Pomak identity may not be agreed upon, but it is broadly a subject of discussion now, as Pomaks continue to perform, for internal and external audiences, their distinctive heritage and subjectivity.

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