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# Communist Modernisation

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## and Gender: The Experience

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### of Bulgarian Muslims,

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#### 1970–1990

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#### Abstract

*This article, which is part of a wider project, 'Experiences of Communist Modernisation in a Bulgarian Muslim Village, 1945–2005', examines the assimilation of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims in the Rhodope Mountains in the 1970s. By analysing communist efforts to 'modernise' Bulgarian Muslims, it sheds light on the relationship between modernity and the views of the communist state on such cultural categories as 'nation', 'ethnicity', 'gender' and 'religion'. It argues that this particular campaign was not simply the latest chapter in an ongoing effort by the Bulgarian authorities to assimilate such populations, but should rather be seen as a specific response by the communist regime to ideas of modernity. Despite national and patriotic elements, the aim of the communist assimilation campaign was to introduce 'modernity' and 'civilisation' to the whole of Bulgarian society, especially those living at the social, cultural and political peripheries. In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in communist eastern Europe, gender and ethnic policy merged. Gender equality was one of the essential aims of the modernisation programme, but for the communist modernisers introducing gender equality among ethnically marginal groups, such as the rural Muslim group of Pomaks, was even more important. 'Emancipating' Muslim women was more significant than the 'struggle against religion' or the 'fight for national homogeneity'.*

Scholars of eastern Europe have long debated the nature of the relationship between nationalism and communism. Some authors, such as Mary Neuburger, argue that in Bulgaria the communist ethos was to a large extent overtaken by nationalist ideas.<sup>1</sup> This essay explores the relationship between the ethnic, gender and social

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 75, 83.

policies of the communist state by examining a particular set of assimilation policies imposed on Bulgaria's Muslim minorities. These minorities comprised three groups: the Turks, the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) and the Muslim Roma. The minority status of these groups and the problems associated with their integration into a nationally defined community goes back to the dissolution of the imperial system of government in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 1878, the Muslim population represented a considerable part of the total population.<sup>2</sup> The impact of war, migration and assimilation led to a gradual decline in numbers over time, and by 1945,<sup>3</sup> official statistics show that the Muslim minority had stabilised to about 10 per cent of the country's population.<sup>4</sup>

According to Bulgarian national myth, Pomaks are an autochthonous Slavic population who had been forcibly converted to Islam, but succeeded in preserving Bulgarian as their 'mother tongue'.<sup>5</sup> This ethnic ambiguity – as Muslims who speak Bulgarian – made them an especially vulnerable group and presented a challenge for a Bulgarian state founded on principles of political nationalism and ethnic and religious unity.<sup>6</sup> Throughout its existence, the Bulgarian state embarked on several assimilation campaigns against the Pomaks, with the objective of incorporating the group into the 'core' of the Bulgarian nation.<sup>7</sup> The aims, intensity and dynamics of

<sup>2</sup> The statistics for the Pomak population show an interesting dynamic. In 1880 there were 20,000 Pomaks, in 1910 there were 21,143, but in 1920 there were 94,000. See Rumen Daskalov, *Bŭlgarskoto Obshtestvo 1878–1939* (Sofia: Gutenberg, 2005), I, 15, 41. By contrast, the Turkish population decreased from 23.1 per cent in 1880 to 9.6 per cent in 1946, 36. See also Piotr Eberhardt, *Między Rosją a Niemcami: przemiany narodowościowe w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XX w* (Warsaw: PWN, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> For the migration of Muslims from the newly established Bulgarian territories in the late nineteenth century see Daskalov, *Bŭlgarskoto Obshtestvo*, and Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> According to the 1992 census, there were 700,000 Turks and 250,000 Pomaks: Nikola Genov and Anna Krŭsteva, eds., *Bulgaria 1960–1995: Trends of Social Development* (Sofia: National and Global Development, 1999); see also Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki, eds., *Muslim Identity and the Balkan state* (London: Hurst, 1997), 33.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the position of Pomaks within the Bulgarian national narrative see Maria Todorova, 'Identity (Trans)formation Among Pomaks in Bulgaria', in László Kurti and Juliet, Langman, eds., *Beyond Borders: Remaking Cultural Identities in the New East and Central Europe* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997), 63–82. For attempts to incorporate Pomaks into the Bulgarian national corpus see Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> For the political philosophy of Bulgarian national identity and the construction of ethnic, national and cultural consciousness see Ivan Elenkov and Rumen Daskalov, *Zashto sme takiva? V tŭrnenie na bŭlgarskata kulturna identichnost* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo Prosveta, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Daskalov, *Bŭlgarskoto Obshtestvo*, 41; Bilâl N. Şimsir, *The Turks of Bulgaria, 1878–1985* (London: K. Rustem and Brothers, 1998); Valeri Stojanov, *Turskoto naselenie v Bŭlgaria mezdu poljusite ne etnicheskata politika* (Sofia: LIK, 1998); Zhorzheta Nazurska, *Bŭlgarskata darzava I nejnite malcinstva (1879–1885)* (Sofia: LIK, 1999); E. Ivanova, *Otchrlenite 'priobshteni' ili procesa narechen 'vŭzroditelen' (1912–1989)* (Sofia: Institut za istochnoevropska humanitaristika, 2002). For the communist assimilation policy see Michail Gruev and Alexei Kaljonski, *Vŭzroditelnijat proces: Mjusulmanskite obshtnosti I komunicheskijat rezim* (Sofia: Institut za isledvane za blizkoto minalo, 2008); T. Georgieva, 'Pomaks: Muslim Bulgarians', in Anna Krŭsteva, ed., *Communities and Identities in Bulgaria* (Ravenna: Longo: Collana di sturdy Balcani e l'Europa Centro-Orientale, University of Bologna, 1998), 221–38; Antonina Zheljzskova, Bozidar Aleksiev and Z. Nazarska, eds., *Mjusulmanskite Obshtnosti na Balkanite i v Bŭlgarija, Istoricheski eskizi* (Sofia: Mezdunaroden Centŭr po Problemite na Malcinstvata i Kulturnite Vzaimodejstva, 1997).

the assimilation programmes applied to Pomaks varied according to the particular political programmes of successive Bulgarian governments. The assimilation politics directed towards the Muslim population often closely reflected broader developments in European international politics, and in particular Bulgarian relations towards its southern neighbour, Turkey.<sup>8</sup> The assimilation policies applied to Bulgaria's three Muslim minorities had complex political backgrounds and differed with respect to their goals, dynamics and procedures. This article addresses the assimilation policy applied to the Pomak minority in the years 1973 and 1974, and asks whether the measures applied were conducted in response to ideas of nationalism or whether, by contrast, they were prompted by a concept of modernity, defined in political terms. The article also considers whether the measures of the 1970s could be read as a continuation of earlier, pre-1939, assimilation campaigns, or whether the communist measures should be interpreted as an attempt to forge a new society through the creation of 'new communist Pomak women'.

The idea of assimilating the Bulgarian-speaking Muslim minority is based on the metaphor of a 'rebirth', which originates in one of the most important national Bulgarian narratives. According to this narrative, Pomaks are descendants of a Christian population forcibly converted to Islam during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. Assimilation, consisting of the organised exchange of items of everyday life symbolising Islamo-Turkish culture, such as dress and personal name, was supposed to return *deraciné* Pomaks to their Bulgarian roots. In line with this narrative the assimilation processes applied to the Muslim population were officially referred to as a 'Process of Rebirth' (*Vǔzroditelen proces*).

The establishment of new national states in the region at the turn of the twentieth century ushered in dramatic economic and social changes. Until that time Pomaks were usually described as shepherds, seasonally migrating between the Rhodope mountains and the Aegean Sea.<sup>9</sup> The seasonal migration and herding economy was gradually restricted by the new system of state frontiers established by the Balkan wars. During the 1920s and 1930s, the transhumant herding economy gradually declined. The collectivisation and expropriation of the land during the 1950s brought a definitive end to this process of seditarisation, and introduced enormous changes to Pomak life. Thus when the communist modernisation programme got under way in the 1960s, Pomaks had been reduced to an impoverished rural population living in deprived regions of the country without economic resources, communications or infrastructure. From the point of view of the national state, Pomaks were ethnically ambivalent and religiously inappropriate. In the eyes of the communist modernisation agents, they were a marginal group living 'at the edges of civilisation'. This made

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between assimilation and international relations with Turkey see Stojanov, *Turskoto naselenie*.

<sup>9</sup> There are very few sources on the economic activities of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims at the turn of the twentieth century; see *Rodopski naprednik*, *Rodopskite pomaci, ot obshchestvenno-ikonomicno gledište dnes i prichinite za isledvaneto im*, 1, 5 (1903), 165; Ivan Batakliiev, 'Chepino, socialno-geografski prouchvanija', *Godishnik na Sofijskijat Universitet*, 26 (1930), 1–119; and Konstantin Jireček, *Cesty po Bulharsku* (Prague: Novočeská bibliotéka, 1888), 294.

them a subject par excellence for the state-organised project of promoting modernity and civilisation.

The main thrust of the assimilation campaign conducted in the western Rhodopes occurred in the first half of the 1970s, although some steps had already been taken in the late 1960s. The assimilation process was directed at changing personal names and banning religiously symbolic items of female dress. In the case of village communities, the renaming and re-dressing measures were accompanied by an organised resettlement programme that removed the shepherds from their hamlets and brought them into new settlements established by the local party officials as 'model' villages, founded 'from the ground up'.<sup>10</sup> Recollections of the assimilation campaign and communist development policies are strongly represented in the social memory of the Pomak village community I examined in the course of this research, as well as those of former members of the communist elite. The narratives developed as part of the social memory of these two groups are one of the instruments of self-representation of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims of the Rhodope region and the main ethnographic source for this study. Using oral history methods allows us to look at communist modernisation from the perspective of those who were actually involved in the process. The analysis is centred on the individual experiences of high-ranking politicians and members of the Muslim village community – that is, those who promoted and organised the modernisation programme, and those who were subjected to it.<sup>11</sup> The former group comprised individuals who had occupied influential positions in the regional political structures of the Communist Party and Fatherland Front, as well as local political activists, so called 'cadres', such as officials of the village party organisations, village mayors and members of the local professional and technical managerial elite (teachers, veterinary surgeons and local state administrators). Most of the respondents of this group worked for most of their lives in the regional administrative district.<sup>12</sup> The second group of respondents were Muslim villagers, mostly women, who had experienced the assimilation campaigns 'from below'. Additional material was acquired from personal archives, the regional monthly periodical *Rodopi*, communist propaganda manuals and other popular cultural and geographical publications.

<sup>10</sup> The village that was the centre of my research was established during the 1950s, and over the course of 1970s it became part of the national industrialisation and urbanisation programme. At that time the new settlement met the demands of providing a mobile labour force and responded to the ideological requirement of introducing modern lifestyles to the rural Muslim population. This particular 'model' village was organised by a local branch of the Party and backed up by two Party officials. In the course of the 1970s similar villages were established in other parts of the Rhodopes and other mountain districts in south-west Bulgaria. However, these projects did not reach the same intensity as here, where a whole community was resettled into a single locality. The peak of the resettlement process coincided with the ongoing re-dressing and renaming campaigns.

<sup>11</sup> The ethnographic material was collected during fieldwork on a 'model' village of some 400 Bulgarian-speaking inhabitants, in the north western part of the Rhodope Mountains between 1998 and 2004.

<sup>12</sup> In order to correspond with the requirements of identity protection rules, villages and towns are referred to by cover initials.

### The ‘re-dressing’ campaigns among the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, 1912–1974

The term ‘re-dressing’ is used here to refer to the radical form of assimilation promoted by restricting or banning particular elements of Pomak dress – the fez in the case of men and the veil in the case of women. The actual focus of the re-dressing varied over time, but from the first days of the Bulgarian state it was central to political attitudes towards national homogeneity and the ‘purity’ of the new state. The first state-sponsored campaign, which took place during the Balkan wars of 1912–13, aimed at converting the Pomaks of the eastern Rhodopes to Orthodox Christianity.<sup>13</sup> The change of national and religious identity was symbolised by having the women ‘discard’ their veil or *feredze*, and replacing it with a scarf, that better corresponded with the religious and political aesthetics of Christian Orthodoxy.<sup>14</sup>

The 1930s saw new re-dressing campaigns. Some of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims embraced certain modernist ideas and founded a cultural patriotic movement, Rodina, whose activities were supported by the Bulgarian government.<sup>15</sup> Based on ideas of progress and enlightenment, Rodina aimed at protecting Pomaks from the ideas of Kemalist modernism and Old Turkish conservatism.<sup>16</sup> The re-dressing campaign of Rodina was officially called ‘throwing away the feredzes and fezes’, but in contrast with the previous attempts at assimilation, the political rhetoric of this programme was more complex. ‘Returning to the roots’ was to be accomplished without tampering with the Pomaks’ religious beliefs. During the Second World War certain dress restrictions and other regulative measures were applied to Pomaks in the Rhodopes region and the occupied territories.

The assimilation policies applied to the western Rhodopes by the communist state reflected, in part, the earlier activities of Rodina. Neuburger argues that ‘the spirit and form of most other Rodina campaigns would be revisited by the B[ulgarian] C[ommunist] P[arty] . . . in the context of socialist progress and integration’.<sup>17</sup> While it is true that the incentives, aims and techniques of the two assimilation processes look similar, it can be argued that there are substantial differences in the ideological

<sup>13</sup> On the assimilation campaign organised by the Bulgarian government and the synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox church in 1912–13, see Vasil Georgiev and Slavo Trifonov, *The Conversion of Bulgarian Mohammedans 1912–1913* (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> The *feredze* is a long black veil traditionally worn by Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire and in the early decades of the modern Bulgarian state. See Georgiev and Trifonov, *Conversion*.

<sup>15</sup> The ideas of this movement were reflected in the *Sbornik Rodina*, ed. Petar Marinov, kn. 1, 2 (Smolen: 1938–1939). See also Petar Marinov, *Bŭlgarite Mochamedani* (Sofia: Angelinov, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> The situation in the 1930s well illustrates the differences in approach to various Muslim groups in Bulgarian ethnic policy. The re-dressing campaigns responded to the Kemalist modernisation process in Turkey, which was considered by the Bulgarian government to be a leftist threat. The secularised Turkish minority in Bulgaria, with ‘de-veiled’ women and men wearing an egalitarian Kemalist cap, represented more of a potential threat to Bulgarian national integrity than Bulgarian’s own veiled Muslim women. Therefore, in order to cut off Bulgarian Turks from outside Turkish influences the Bulgarian state administration supported the national integration of the Pomaks but the taking of a rather conservative line towards the political and religious hierarchy in the Turkish minority. Through the Rodina movement the Bulgarian government sponsored translation of the Koran into Bulgarian; see Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 44, 125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

background that distinguish the communist measures from the programmes carried out by the pre-war authorities. Both campaigns emphasised the aesthetics of women's daily dress, but the political messages underpinning the changes in dress code were diametrically opposed. Both campaigns had a common denominator: the fight against a 'national enemy' – 'Muslim' or 'Turk' – represented in categories of 'oriental darkness', 'impurity' and 'danger'. During the communist period the concept of 'national enemy' merged with concepts of colonial discourse that sought to distinguish Europe from the Orient.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective we need to ask whether 're-dressing' was seen as part of a fight against 'oriental darkness' in favour of civilisation. In addition we suggest that the communist re-dressing campaign was motivated by the desire not simply to promote 'national homogenisation', but also to introduce 'modernisation' and 'civilisation' into a hitherto marginalised Muslim community. The emancipation of Muslim women was part of this process. The aesthetics of Pomak women's dress, together with the change to Muslim names were, at least for a time, a central theme in Communist Party policy.

### The communist 're-dressing' and the new Pomak woman

While earlier modernisation campaigns were concerned with both sexes, the communist assimilation campaigns were directed almost exclusively towards the aesthetics and symbolism of the female body and dress.<sup>19</sup> The communist regime invested enormous material and political resources into reshaping gender relations in Bulgarian society.<sup>20</sup> The re-dressing campaign among Pomaks was organised according to two political programmes. One, the so-called 'Process of Rebirth', had antecedents in the inter-war period. The other, however, stemmed from the communists' own programme, the 'Resolution of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party on the class-party education of Bulgarian Mohammedans' of 1970.<sup>21</sup> The

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; see also Antonina Zheljazkova, Bozidar Aleksiev and Z. Nazarska, eds., *Mjuzjulmanskite Obshtnosti na Balkanite i v Bulgarija, Istoricheski eskizi* (Sofia: Mezunaroden Centar po Problemite na Malcinstvata i Kulturnite Vzaimodejstva, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Communist concerns over the practice of male circumcision by the Turkish minority were rather marginal. See Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 110–13.

<sup>20</sup> For statistics and economic figures reflecting gender aspects of the Bulgarian society pre- and post-1989, see R. Ghodsee Kristen, 'Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria', *L'Homme*, 15, 1 (2004), 24. On changing gender relations among Muslim minorities in Eastern Europe during the post-Socialist transition see R. Ghodsee Kristen, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe* (Ithaca: Princeton University Press, 2009). For interpretations of gender issues in the context of Bulgarian socialist and post-socialist society see Ana Luleva, "'Zhenskijat vüpros", v socialisticheska Bulgarija-ideologija, politika, realnost', in *Socialism: Realnost i iljuzii, Etnologichni aspekti na vsekidnevната kultura* (Sofia: BAN, 2003), 155–74, and E. Krüsteva-Blagoeva, 'Obrazi na Bülgarkata v epochata na socializma', *ibid.*, 182–190. See also Ana Luleva, 'Gender Images in the Bulgarian Village in the Twentieth Century: Between Tradition and Modernity', *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 5 (2001), 151–64; Petür Vodenicharov, 'Bülgarija prez 70-te godoni-nacionalizm, modernizacija, emancipacija? Kriticheski diskursen analiz na totalitarnata politika na pametta', *Balkanistischen Forum*, 1, 2–3 (2004), 104–19.

<sup>21</sup> Gruev and Kaljonski refer to a Party resolution, 'Reshenie na secretariat na CK na BKP za ponatüchna rabota po nacionalno osüznavane na bülgarite s mochamedanska vjara', Sofia, 17 July 1970, in Gruev and Kaljonski, *Vüzroditelnijat proces*, 67.

actual realisation of the modernisation programme at the local level was carried out by regional branches of the Fatherland Front, and was supported by local teachers, doctors and – most enthusiastically – by local party functionaries.

As we shall see, the communist re-dressing campaign was, in contrast to earlier programmes, not a unitary act, but instead part of a wider ideological framework. According to the narratives of those involved in the programmes, the emancipation of women was to affect all spheres of women's lives. The 're-dressing' was only one aspect of a complex modernisation process. Pomak women were depicted in the national and communist discourse as the victims of Islamic religious traditions, cultural backwardness and patriarchal household structures. Muslim women not only represented 'oriental wildness' and dangerous 'legacies' of the Ottoman era, but they belonged to a religiously and ethnically ambiguous group that represented national 'impurity' or 'misogyny'. The Muslim Pomak women stood 'at the periphery' of society and therefore merited the attention of the state's campaign for 'emancipation' and 'civilisation'. They should, in short, be seen as the flagship of the communist programme of modernisation.

A former first secretary of the party committee recalled on this topic,

The most important motivation was to enhance living standards. The policy was to have economic progress in both groups, Christians and Muslims. We needed to equalise their standard of living. The Rodopski Penzion [a boarding school] was founded in Smoljan and the secretariat of central party committee decided that [Pomak] girls had to learn. With them we will break through!<sup>22</sup>

The second aspect which made the communist programme different from those that went before was its ideological breadth. Local party officials aimed to achieve the social equalisation of the Pomak minority with the rest of Bulgarian society. That was to occur primarily through a process of Pomak education and female emancipation.<sup>23</sup>

The former head of the local branch of the Fatherland Front described the assimilation programme of the 1970s in the following terms:

The aim was modernisation, enlightenment, in order that they [Pomak women] would not feel isolated as second-class citizens. We sent the girls to learn cooking and housekeeping and history. In GD town there were exhibitions of what they have learned, and after that they had to go abroad. I went to Hungary. We made it so that they were self-confident. They [the opponents of emancipation] said that we gave them to the soldiers. We sent those [Pomaks girls] to workshops for the electrical relays, in order for them to become economically self-sufficient. It was the 'Rebirth Process'. The old brides [i.e. bridal costumes] were so thick that they almost fainted. And now we have such charming weddings! We wanted them to go away to study. We especially wanted them to become medical nurses and have the privilege of higher education. From five candidates they took two Pomaks. They themselves were under pressure because of their names. They used Bulgarian names in order to avoid being classed as second class . . . We have been constructing schools, roads, health complexes, and now the Arab world builds mosques here.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Mr R., the former first secretary of the J town Party committee, later chief of propaganda for the regional Party committee, 14 July 2004.

<sup>23</sup> On the emancipation of women in the context of the communist modernisation discourse see Vodenicharov, 'Bŭlgarija prez 70-te godoni-nacionalizm, modernizacija, emancipacija?'.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Mrs C., a former head of the town organisation of the Fatherland Front, 9 July 2004.

From this and similar narratives we can see how the values promoted by the Fatherland Front sought to create an ideal, modern *emancipated* woman, who knew how to dress, how to cook a ‘rational diet’, who had her own income, culture, class consciousness and political opinions, and, of course, who looked pretty and charming.

Pre-war assimilation policies ascribed politically symbolic meanings to the fez and circumcision of Muslim men and to the *feredze*, or veil, of Muslim women. The state restrictions on religiously symbolic elements of women’s dress were implemented in accordance with the communists’ distinctive ideological principles and were therefore focused on different items of Pomak women’s dress. Particular attention was shown to the ‘white veil’, an item seen in ethnography and popular discourse as a symbol of ‘shame’, ‘sadness’ or ‘guilt’, in sum, representing the Pomaks’ forced conversion to Islam under the Ottomans. The other element which caught the attention of communist officials was the characteristic trousers, *shalvari*.

In contrast with the previous campaigns, the communist re-dressing programme was neither merely an extreme attempt to homogenise the nation and fight the ‘national enemy’, nor an attempt to ‘secularise’ this section of Bulgarian society, as would commonly be found in other communist states. The aim of the 1970s re-dressing campaigns was not only to ‘strip off’ the veil but also precisely to ‘re-dress’ Pomak women, in the sense of inventing a new aesthetic and symbolic meanings for the female body.

### Pomak women in the communist *folklor*

Among other cultural and political mechanisms used to promote the idea of emancipated Pomak woman were the institutions of Bulgarian ethnographical and folklore studies (*folklor*).<sup>25</sup> In the communist regimes of central and eastern Europe, *folklor* studies developed into a proper scientific discipline. Centred on the concept of ‘folk’ – the people – *folklor* studies became a tool to legitimise the internal colonial discourse of the communist state and its modernist ideology of ‘development and progress’.

In the 1960s and 1970s modernisation, in terms of urbanisation and industrialisation, was running at full tilt and brought about considerable social, cultural and economic change, particularly in the peripheral rural areas such as the Rhodopes region. One of the tasks of the official ethnography and museum institutions was to collect and ‘conserve’ examples of the disappearing countryside and its ‘folk culture’.<sup>26</sup> This conscious effort to preserve the past only went to emphasise the sharp distinction between the ‘backwardness’ of the ‘traditional past’ and the achievements of the ‘socialist present’ and the potential of the ‘communist future’. Folklore studies

<sup>25</sup> On Bulgarian cultural policy between 1944 and 1990 see Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturnijat front: bŭlgarska kultura prez epochata na komunizm – politichesko upravlenie, ideologicheski osnovania, institucionalni rezimi* (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences established an ethnographic project to collect and conserve examples of ‘disappearing traditions’ and ‘folk culture’ in the Rhodopes region; see *Kompleksna Nauchna Rodopska Ekspeditsija prez 1953 Godina. Dokladi I Materiali* (Sofia: Bŭlgarska Akademia na Naukite, 1953).



were also important in cultivating the concept of the ‘noble savage’. In the Bulgarian context, the qualities of the ‘noble savage’ were traditionally ascribed to Pomaks, just as the image of ‘wildness’ was ascribed to the region of the Rhodopes as a whole. The Rhodopes are traditionally perceived as the location of cultural ‘otherness’, whose inhabitants represent examples of a ‘genuine folk’ and ‘purist national culture’.<sup>27</sup>

The representation of the Rhodopes region in this manner reflected the classic dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, ‘urban’ and ‘rural’; but it also had connotations for ethnicity and gender. In line with the gender and ethnic policies of the communist state, the representations of the female aesthetic of Pomaks, the particular elements of women’s dress and some of the objects in everyday use, were key subjects of folkloristic collections.<sup>28</sup> Representing the ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ aesthetics of Muslim women helped to create an image of a Pomak Muslim woman that stood in marked contrast both to present reality and, no less, the future potential of the region. Visual and other ethnographic images represent the ‘native’ woman from the Rhodope mountains as a ‘noble savage’, having qualities of ‘natural beauty’, while at the same time being invested with values of ‘national culture’.<sup>29</sup>

Another task of *folklor* was to represent the Rhodopes region and its predominantly Muslim, Pomak, Turkish and Roma inhabitants as a natural part of the national narrative, a ‘treasure’ and source of ‘national purity’. But in reality the aesthetics and the material culture of the Rhodopes region were a product of the region’s long exposure to Turco-Islamic cultural influences. In order to accommodate an image of the ‘national treasure’ with the aesthetics of the ‘national enemy’, a special ethnographic term, ‘Rodopchanka’, was created, to represent a woman from the Rhodope region.<sup>30</sup> In the ethnographical discourse, therefore, the female inhabitants of the Rhodopes were never explicitly represented as Muslims, while special prominence was given to the non-Muslim elements of both the region’s material culture and the aesthetics of its folk costumes. Thus *jasmaks*, the headscarves for women, the long veils, or the so called ‘coloured brides’ (*sarena nevesta*) are always depicted as a part of Bulgarian, Christian or even pagan culture, never Muslim.<sup>31</sup> The communist folklore thereby constructed images of (Muslim) women that closely correlated with the ‘living’ aesthetics of the modern and emancipated woman.

<sup>27</sup> These themes are illustrated in the work of Nikolaj Chajtov; see his *Shumki ot Gabür* (Sofia: Narodna Mladez, 1966); *Divi Razkazi* (Plovdiv: Izdatelstvo na Christo G. Ganov, Sofia, 1982). See also Ekaterina Tomova, *Zabravenite ot Nebeto* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Otechestvenija Front, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> The most prominent Bulgarian ethnographer of folk costume is considered to be Milena Veleva; see her ‘Pregled na Prouchvaniata na Bulgarskite Narodni Nosii’, *Izvestiia na Ethnografskijat Institut i Muzei*, 3 (1958). See also Milena Veleva and Evegnyja Lepavtsova, *Bülgarski narodni nosii v juzna bülgarija prez XIX i parvata polovina na XX vek* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bülgarskata Akademia na Naukite, 1988).

For the relationship between the concepts of ‘social’ and material culture see, for example, Ganka Mikhailova, ‘Socialni Aspekti na Narodnoto Obleklo’, *Bülgarskata Ethnographija*, 3–4 (1976), 178.

<sup>29</sup> See images in Galina Krüsteva and Alanas Primovski, *Rodopsko narodno iskustvo, Takani I Mednikarstvo* (Bülgarski Chudoznik, 1970), figs. 58 and 96.

<sup>30</sup> The ethnographic name is still used in some Bulgarian ethnography: Nadja Velcheva, *Rodopchankata, shtrichi ot ethnosocialnija I ethnopsichologicheski portret* (Sofia: BAN, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> See Krüsteva and Primovski, *Rodopsko narodno iskustvo*.

The two conflicting representations of ‘Rodopchankata’ – on the one hand ‘exotic’ and ‘savage’ and on the other emancipated and urbanised, liberated from ‘religion’, ‘tradition’ and ‘oriental subordination’ – reflects the tension lying at the heart of the modernisation discourse: ‘folk culture’ versus progress, ‘noble savage’ versus civilised woman, subordinated Muslim woman versus modern emancipated Bulgarian woman. Ethnographic representations of Muslim women’s dress addressed the concept of women’s emancipation while simultaneously justifying the programme of assimilation.<sup>32</sup>

### The veil and *shalvari* and the Communist Mission for Beauty

Some scholars interpret the ‘re-dressing’ element of the modernisation programme at this time as simply part of the ‘de-veiling campaigns’ organised by the communist regime: ‘State-inspired de-veiling campaigns in Bulgaria, as with other colonial and postcolonial policies, emerged as part of a constellation of ambitious modernisation efforts, that, ideologically, required a homogeneous, loyal, modern, “native” population.’<sup>33</sup> Using ethnographic evidence, it is possible to develop this argument further and suggest that the re-dressing which took place in the context of this development of the new village in the 1970s had a more complex ideological background. Although there is no doubting the moral ambiguity of the whole assimilation project, in order to understand this complexity we need to appreciate the important role played by ‘beauty’ in the re-dressing process.

The aim of the re-dressing plan was to eliminate those elements of women’s dress considered by the agents of modernisation and emancipation to be ‘traditional’, ‘backward’ and, more importantly, ‘ugly’. During the ‘re-dressing’ programme the distinctive elements of daily ‘Pomak’ dress – the veil and *shalvari* trousers – were supposed to be eliminated and replaced by clothes that conformed to the new politics of aesthetics.<sup>34</sup> The following narrative comes from a former senior party official, politically committed and dedicated to the idea of emancipated ‘Muslim’ women, recalling a visit to a Pomak mountain village.

The father shouted at his daughter, ‘Run away!’ When we were about to leave I said, ‘Why should she go away? We only wanted your daughter to come and work down below so that she could get money, and so forth’ . . . She had to disappear because he was afraid we would have a bad influence on her. That was the reason. For reason that there was fear, not of communist ideology [but of] the fact that we might somehow persuade her that she is *beautiful*.

When we came, we found them [Pomaks] in a state of deathly hunger. They had cows, fruit; men worked, but they were constantly afraid of getting into some collective where they would become dependent and they could be easily influenced. Second, it might lead to a change in their customs, that they might abandon religion, not have enough of everything. That was one of the main reasons . . . Both for us and for them. We knew that we would succeed here . . . It is possible

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Neuberger, ‘Difference Unveiled: Bulgarian National Imperatives and the Re-dressing of Muslim Women in the Communist Period 1945–89’, *Nationalities Papers*, 25 (1997), 169–81, here 172.

<sup>34</sup> The colour, patterns and shape of the veils and *shalvari* are different in each village.

that we were wrong, but it upset us how J town looked. You go out into the streets and instead of pretty young girls you see, how could I put it, you see dreadful backwardness! It was above all appearances that offended us. The clothing! They had to come wrapped up.<sup>35</sup> Here and there. And all that's left for you to see are the eyes. That's all that's left. And that is with the young girls. No, but they had to get rid of all these trousers [*shalvari*! That was the idea. Not forcefully, but as it's said, to integrate her into Bulgarian society. So that she joined it.<sup>36</sup>

'Beauty', as presented by former Communist bosses, was, then, a crucial motive for the re-dressing campaign. In the oral histories, the notion of 'beauty', constituting the aesthetics of women's appearance, is clearly contrasted with the notion of 'backwardness' and 'ugliness'.

This narrative, as well as the following one, demonstrates the importance of such qualities as 'beauty' and 'ugliness' for their understanding of individuality, emancipation and, consequently, modernity. The narratives also show how public space became part of the area of contestation.

When I finished gymnasium, I worked for the summer in the forest administration in one brigade which had about forty Muhammadan girls. I was the only Bulgarian and the only man among them. In the morning I couldn't recognize them in front of the forest administration, because all of them were wrapped up. You could only see the eyes. They would tell me that they are going here and there. As soon as we left the village, they unwrapped. In the fields they worked open-necked. They stripped off everything. When we returned and approached J, they wrapped up once again. I used to speak with them, such young, pretty girls. They knew that they were pretty. They didn't want to hide themselves. Only the little ugly ones who are the defenders of wrapping up, and they shared this with me and said they wanted to be wrapped up.<sup>37</sup>

The veil, and later the long black *feredze* took centre stage in communist attempts to tackle the religious identity of their 'national enemy', the Turks. Despite the re-dressing efforts of earlier assimilation campaigns, when communist officials came to the western Rhodopes in the mid-1970s, Pomak women were still wearing their distinctive wide trousers (*shalvari*), long woollen aprons and white veils. It was this combination that made them stand out, not only to visiting Bulgarians, but also to other Muslim minorities, the Turks and the Muslim Roma. Former communist officials frequently use aesthetic epithets in relation to the *feredze*, and it was this item of clothing that most officials found most irritating and *ugly*, and most problematic for their attempt to integrate the Pomaks, especially Pomak women, into the 'cultural world'.<sup>38</sup> Even thirty years after the re-dressing campaign, it was the 'ugliness' of this form of dress that most upset former officials.

<sup>35</sup> 'Wrapped up' means 'veiled' – in the local dialect *zabulena*; de-veiled remains *razbulena*.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews with Mr R, the former first secretary of the town party committee, and Mr P, the former secretary of the national committee, J town, 18 July 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Mr P, 13 July 2004.

<sup>38</sup> One former communist official, recalling a visit to the region in 1974, asked the interviewer, 'You know what a *feredze* is? It's that ugly thing.' This recollection contradicts those historical descriptions according to which Pomak women had already thrown away their *feredze* in 1913 or in the course of the 1930s. It is difficult to estimate whether in the 1970s most of the women in the Rhodopes were still wearing *feredze*. However, the fact that *feredze* figures in recollections underlines its symbolic importance.

For these individuals, re-dressing, described as ‘un-wrapping’, was a cultural necessity. As a former school master and head of the National Committee in the town of ‘J’ admitted, ‘Insofar as there is talk of un-wrapping, I personally think that at least it speeded up the process of integration not to the Bulgarian nation but to the cultural world.’<sup>39</sup> The concept of wrapping and un-wrapping, veiling and de-veiling is particularly relevant in the Bulgarian national state discourse; the veil is traditionally perceived as culturally retrograde and politically dangerous, a symbol of religious oppression and Islamic orthodoxy, and emblematic of the ‘national enemy’.<sup>40</sup> Re-dressing therefore did not only aim at stripping away the veil, but was a deliberate attempt to impose a new concept of ‘beauty’.<sup>41</sup> ‘Wrapping’ and ‘un-wrapping’ was conceptualised as a structural dichotomy of ‘hiding’ and ‘displaying’. The former represented oppression and violence, the latter, especially when related to beauty, was synonymous with emancipation and modernisation. The new aesthetics represented a new understanding of gender concepts, resonating with the communist ideas of modernity. Thus the communists’ re-dressing campaign was not only concerned with ‘de-veiling’ or ‘stripping off’ Muslim women, but could be seen as creating a new political reality by introducing new aesthetic concepts. The re-dressing can be read as a ‘symbolic struggle over identity and meaning’,<sup>42</sup> where the concept of ‘beauty’ was used to construct ideal types of men and women. This concept embraces the three essential ideological concepts involved in the communist re-dressing campaign: the emancipation of women, the civilising effect of communist modernisation, and the national–Orientalist discourse. Concern articulated over women’s ‘beauty’ can be seen as a specifically local response to modernity.

### Communist modernisation and ‘middle class’ beauty

The communist ‘ideal woman’ was composed of a complex set of aesthetic and political values and a mixture of physical and mental abilities. The aesthetics of the ‘new women’ of the Rhodopes were closer to concepts traditionally considered ‘middle class’ rather than ‘proletarian’.<sup>43</sup> Re-dressing was, in short, grafting middle-class aesthetics onto an intensive communist programme of development and modernisation.

Although at first glance this might appear paradoxical, the process echoed developments seen across the socialist states of central and eastern Europe at the

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mr P, 13 July 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 116. A similar perspective is taken in the European ‘orientalist’ approach, where the veil is always seen as a symbol of oriental ‘wildness and darkness’.

<sup>41</sup> For further examples of the importance of ‘beauty’ in communist re-dressing see Ivanova, *Otchvrilenite ‘Priobshteni’*, 125.

<sup>42</sup> David Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> For instance, Volkov uses Elias’s theory about a connection between the rise of an absolutist state and the creation of the concept of ‘privacy and individualism’. For an interpretation of the change in cultural policy which took place in the 1930s in the USSR see Vadim Volkov, ‘The Concept of “Kulturnost”’: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process’, in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 210–31.

time.<sup>44</sup> It also resembles the situation facing Soviet cultural policy in the 1930s, known to scholars as the ‘big deal’. Vadim Volkov has shown how Soviet cultural policies during the 1930s can be viewed as a form of civilising process in the sense used by Norbert Elias, namely that seemingly unimportant and subtle changes in social organisation – manners, public comportment, standards of hygiene, speech, food consumption, dwelling space and so on – are connected to the macro-structural conditions in which these changes were situated. These changes all help to establish the sphere of private and family life, as distinct from public and collective life, and the concept of self-identity which is increasingly dependent on the sense of privacy and individualism.<sup>45</sup> In similar vein, then, the re-dressing campaign organised in the Rhodopes region was a specific ‘civilising process’ aimed at emancipating Pomak women through the promotion of a sense of ‘individualism’ and ‘privacy’. The women’s dress code was to reflect the enhanced social level of the Pomak minority and its integration into the modern, urban and ‘civilised’ world.

An example of ‘middle-class’ *civic* aesthetics contained in the modernisation process can be seen in the initiative taken by the authorities to organise in remote mountain hamlets the communal making of a ball dress – the aesthetic symbol par excellence of middle-class values. One of those involved recalled that, in 1972,

We needed to organise a graduation ball. Over several months we were conducting enlightenment programmes and . . . were trying to convince them [the parents of the children] to let their children to go to the ball. And the girls started to sew nice appropriate little dresses for that ball . . . There were also assigned for those forty girls one female teacher and one male teacher to bring them safely home. Before the ball started they did not drink and they did not eat. The mothers came and started to knock on the doors. And took them away. In the morning I went to school and there was a whole group of girls waiting for the results of the exams. And I asked them, my pupils, who were very nice and pleasant, ‘Did you sleep well?’ And one of them answered. ‘This night we did not sleep.’ And I say, ‘And what have you been doing?’ And she says, ‘We were crying. All night.’ The whole night they were crying, because their parents did not let them go to the ball. Even though before they had agreed. They gave money for the dresses. And there were many similar things. But at the last moment there was someone who said that this is ‘non-believers’ work’ [*gjavurska rabota*], and do you know what *gjavur* means? A non-believer, an infidel. And they did not allow them to go. And today? Today they are uncontrollable. And so it is. And so it was. And along with the talk about ‘unveiling’ [*razbulvane*] I personally think, that it speeded up that process, the process of integration not into the Bulgarian nation, but into the cultural world.<sup>46</sup>

This narrative shows how the discussion and conflict between the communist modernisers and the Muslim villagers were centred on resistance less to socialism and the communist regime than to certain values and understandings of modernity.

Among other issues the ‘ball dress’ conflict reflects the concern of the communist modernisers over the aesthetic forms of femininity. For example, the regional journal, *Rodopi*, which was promoting, celebrating and propagating ideas about the communist

<sup>44</sup> For ‘middle class’ values in a socialist cultural context see Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middle-Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Volkov refers to Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process, Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, rev. edn (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Interview with the former schoolmaster Mr P and his wife, 14 July 2004.

enlightenment, had a special rubric for women containing information and advice about fashion, including sketches of fashionable women's dresses. Designs of these dress models correspond more with the urban 'civic' fashion style than with the classical understanding of proletarian aesthetics. Ideals of elegant women dresses in the urban style of 'Coco Chanel' were supposed to replace Muslim rural multi-coloured *shalvari* and the white veils of Pomak women.<sup>47</sup> Instead of the veil and *shalvari*, women were offered dresses free from both religious symbols and the proletarian aesthetic propagated in Bulgaria as recently as the 1960s.<sup>48</sup> Thus Coco Chanel should be considered a manifestation of the individualism, liberation and emancipation of women not just in the West but also in the remote corners of the Balkans. Within the context of organised modernisation in the 1970s, the aesthetics proposed by the communist state was more 'middle class' than 'proletarian', more 'civic' than communist.

### Communist beauty and purity in the 'ideal house'

Some scholars of socialism argue that one of the essential parts of the 'civilising project' conducted by the communist modernisation programmes centred on the introduction of certain concepts of purity and hygiene.<sup>49</sup> This process is clearly identifiable in the context of the re-dressing campaign in the Rhodopes. Hygiene frequently crops up in the recollections of the former party officials and the cadre involved in Bulgaria's modernisation programmes.

The Fatherland Front organised a contest known as the 'ideal house' (*obrazcov dom*).<sup>50</sup> The contest judged hygiene standards both in- and outside the house and the winning households were modern houses with large windows, a rendered façade, and an orderly front garden – a picture of tidiness and purity which contrasted markedly to the image of ramshackle wooden houses found in the Turkish neighbourhoods, with their balconies and window grilles. In keeping with the state's approach to women's bodies, clothing and names, the aesthetic values of the 'ideal house' corresponded to distinctly 'middle-class' values and reflected the communists' 'fight for beauty' in the name of modernity.

### The 'nakedness' and 'shame' of modernity: the perceptions of the villagers

Naturally, the emancipatory programmes promulgated by the state officials were viewed rather differently by the Muslim villagers themselves. To the local Muslim women the re-dressing campaign was seen as oppressive to their cultural and religious

<sup>47</sup> Karin Tylor refers to 'Chanel-style' short skirts which arrived in Bulgaria during the latter half of the 1960s: *Let's Twist Again: Youth and Leisure in Socialist Bulgaria, Studies on South East Europe* (Vienna and Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 71.

<sup>48</sup> See Neuburger, *Orient Within*, 179.

<sup>49</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small People of the North* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 232.

<sup>50</sup> The award itself took the form of a little metal tablet with the inscription 'exemplary house'. Many houses with the award can still be seen in the township of Velingrad, one of the most important urban settlements in the western Rhodopes.

values, collective identity and personal dignity. As one villager, a former nurse at the local doctor's surgery, recalled, 'Stary and Marx [the local functionaries] went around the village with the police and pestered us to take off our pantaloons. But you can't go naked!' The interviewee went on:

It was offensive. Bulgarians never say that it was forced. That it happened by force. [Questioner: And what actually did the Bulgarians want?] They wanted us to be the same. Like Bulgarians. Later there were a lot of people at the meeting against taking back our names. They said that three hundred years ago we were the same as them, Bulgarians. Yes, but we are already something different. We aren't like them. We are already something different.<sup>51</sup>

Re-dressing was, then, clearly perceived against the background of a national myth about enforced Islamisation, and suggests that organised re-dressing frequently reinforced ethnic divisions. Another woman from the Muslim community recalled,

At that time *chergite* [long veils] were forbidden. The clothes were forbidden because they have changed our names and they wanted us to wear only skirt or only trousers. And they had prohibited the making of such peasant clothes which we used to wear before. . . . These clothes which we are wearing now: Muslim dress. [Questioner: Also *shalvari*?] Yes, we have to wear trousers. . . . They wanted us to wear colourful veils, not white ones. They wanted *shalvari* not to be seen and worn at all. And also veils. They banned everything.<sup>52</sup>

The concept of 'nakedness' proved a powerful counterpoint to the liberating idea of 'beauty' offered by the communist officials. To Muslim women, 'nakedness', connected with social disgrace and public shame, was related to situations in which women would appear in public without a veil, headscarf or *shalvari*. Thus a woman donning an urban-style, elegant knee-length dress would most likely have been considered to be naked. The local women responded to the initiatives by carefully balancing the modernisation discourses with their own conceptions of nakedness and shame.<sup>53</sup> During the first wave of re-dressing, in the 1960s, women adopted the official designs, but replaced the veils with some other variety of cloth with the same symbolic function.<sup>54</sup> They abandoned the white scarf but kept their heads covered with a colourful scarf; instead of the *shalvari* and waistcoat they wore a blue working dress, donated by the local agricultural co-operative.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, this alternative was acceptable to the local communist modernisers.

By the late 1990s, women's dresses continued to combine 'traditional' and 'modern' elements; most wore blue working uniforms over counterfeit *addidas*

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Mrs E, from the Muslim village CM, 15 July 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Mrs S, from the Muslim village CM, a former worker in the local tailoring workshop, 16 July 2004.

<sup>53</sup> For comparison see a similar practice of making compromise between ideology and practice described by Alfred Gell, 'Newcomers to the World of Goods: Consumption among the Muria Gonds', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 120. The Muria Gonds of Madhya Pradesh invent their own uniforms for public occasions, revealing the dynamism of what Gell calls 'collective styles'.

<sup>54</sup> On alternative women's clothing given during the re-dressing campaigns in the 1960s see L. V. Markova, 'Bolgari mjusulmane (Pomaki)', in *Ethnicheski menshinstva v sovremennoj Evrope* (Moscow: Institut ethnologii a antropologii, RAN, 1997), 116.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

trousers, although others donned a variation of the *shalvari* and an artificial silk headscarf bearing flower patterns and metallic colours, a clear throwback to the re-dressing attempts of the 1970s. Even in recent years women in the Muslim villages in a particular region still used a certain pattern of dress that balanced the practical, religious and social demands made on their dress and appearance.<sup>56</sup>

In this respect the re-dressing campaign was not without result. The appearance of most Pomak women did not blend in with the majority population, and Pomak women remain easily identifiable as a distinctive religious and ethnic minority. The concept of 'nakedness' and 'shame', based on cultural and religious determinants, continue to influence the local absorption of ideas on emancipation and modernity. The cultural determinants of women's dress and aesthetics did not change immediately with the fall of communism in 1990. The concepts of 'nakedness', 'shame' and 'beauty' as part of female aesthetics started to have a different meaning only relatively recently among younger generation as a consequence of the recent major socio-political changes in this part of Europe.

### Conclusion

This paper supports the more general argument that the assimilation efforts conducted by the communist state among Pomaks were part of a broader, determined political programme to introduce 'modernity and civilisation' at the periphery. In other words, the 're-dressing' campaign of 1970s in the Rhodope mountains was part of larger ideological project of modernisation. In this framework the re-dressing should not be seen as a radical form of assimilation imposed by a nationally oriented communist state or an exercise in colonial discourse to subdue Muslim women. Rather it should be seen as an attempt to create a new communist woman possessing a new aesthetic and a new set of 'middle-class' values and aspirations.

For those charged with promoting the re-dressing campaign, the measures were seen as a way of carrying out a 'civilising' mission at the periphery of their country. Oral histories, ethnographic studies, folkloristic collections and regional periodicals propagating communist enlightenment show that the assimilation plan and the aesthetic forms it brought in its wake collided head-on with the cultural beliefs of the villagers. The communist conception of 'beauty' was in conflict with the Pomaks' conception of 'nakedness' and 'shame'. The modernisation project affected the liminal spaces between public and private and, as a result, the new politics of aesthetics often had to be imposed by force.

The re-dressing campaign fell under the umbrella of one of the political programmes of the Communist Party and was executed by the National Front and other institutions. It was underpinned by the huge personal commitment of local Communist Party functionaries who, in some cases, carried out the 're-dressing' acts themselves. In broad terms, the modernisation programme was based on Lenin's thesis on the shape of communist society and promoted the ideology of 'development and

<sup>56</sup> Even today, older women wear white scarves in combination with blue garnet of the uniform dress.



progress'. However, the distinguishing feature of the communists' assimilation efforts is that they were not limited to the symbolic exercise of power over target groups through the introduction of new cultural values. Communist concerns over people's bodies and dress sense reflected the demands that any modern state would make on its citizens. This case study shows how the communist elite, the bearers of modernity, held it imperative to be 'advanced', achieving a fully communist society 'as soon as possible'. They extended the demands of the 'civilising process' to such an extent and they applied them in such a way that they encountered rejection and resistance. This meant that applying the assimilation measures relied to a huge extent on the enthusiasm of its own agents – communist party functionaries, teachers, technicians, veterinaries, medical doctors – and its measures had to be introduced with both symbolic and real violence.

Some scholars suggest that the modernisation process became a bartering process between the regime and Muslim minority. However – and this is again part of more general argument about the assimilation project conducted by a communist state – the experience of re-dressing in the western Rhodopes region reveals that the whole modernisation campaign – in contrast to that the concept of *kulturnost* in the USSR, which is described by various authors as an example of a process that took place without recourse to open violence and terror – was perceived by the villagers as violent and enforced.

In sum, re-dressing, as part of the assimilation campaign, was one of the major pillars of the communist modernisation programme, and it cannot be reduced to a simple policy of 'de-veiling' or the exercise of power by a totalitarian state. Its implementation was indirectly supported by Bulgarian ethnography and folklore studies. It is argued here that it was part of the communist version of emancipation of women, an attempt to promote 'civilisation' at the periphery, fight against 'tradition and backwardness', cleanse the nation of the 'Ottoman legacy' and, at the same time, construct a new conception of 'civic beauty'. The re-dressing was an articulation of the effort of the modern state to create modern citizens and the expression of a general move towards 'middle-class' values in the ideological context of the communist regime.

Thus, finally, the communist assimilation programme appropriated nationalist discourses and revived inter-war policies aimed at national homogenisation by assimilating Muslims into a Christian Orthodox society. However, the assimilation campaign organised by the communist regime had engaged not only with the ideas of nationalism but also with wider ideas of 'modernity' and 'civilisation', aspiring to assimilate the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims not only into national society but, even more, into a new, modern, secular socialist world.