

## A Sociological Research on Pomaks: The Case of Kırklareli\*

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**Abstract:** This study has been carried out in order to understand and explain the cultural patterns of Pomaks living in the city of Kırklareli. Also examines Pomaks' process of immigration to Turkey with the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and provides general information on Pomaks and Kırklareli. The functionality of their social establishments, which are component parts of Pomaks' sociocultural structure, such as family, solidarity networks, work patterns, religion, various beliefs and practices, social ceremonies and rituals, food culture, and language, have been examined, analyzing the mutual interactions of these establishments and the variations that they have experienced from past to present. This research, which has been performed to understand Pomaks' general characteristics and to determine the tools and methods through which cultural transmission is performed, is a situation determination study. This research examining Pomaks' culture has been conducted using the qualitative research method and in-depth interview technique. In-depth interviews with 30 people have been conducted during the fieldwork at the Pomak villages and town centers that are subsidiary to Kırklareli. I attempt to explain Pomaks' sociocultural structures by evaluating the data obtained from the field research.

**Keywords:** cultural structure • Kırklareli • Pomaks • sociocultural structure

\* This is an extended abstract of the paper entitled "Pomaklar üzerine sosyolojik bir araştırma: Kırklareli örneęi" published in *Toplumsal Deęişim*.

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Pomaks are referred to as Islamized Bulgarians for Bulgaria, as Muslim Greeks who speak Slavic for Greece, and as Turks who had been attempted to be made Slavs for Turkey (Boboc-Cojocaru, 2013, p. 334). For example, a Pomak living in Bulgaria had to change names six times with Bulgarian names in the process that occurred from the Balkan Wars until the fall of communism because of Bulgaria's policies of nationalism. When looking at the policies that coerced all Pomaks to belong to their nationality, the word *Pomak* is seen to express the state of having stayed together much more than belonging to a nation. Pomaks' being placed in a grey area on the point of nationality leads them to come to an area where all states want to establish dominance (Neuburger, 2000, p. 183). Other countries with Pomak populations apart from Turkey have developed political discourses that have constantly aimed to include Pomaks in their nationality. One must say that very few independent studies have been performed on Pomaks in this context. Sociological research that will be performed on Pomaks can be said to be more significant in contrast to studies that emphasize their ethnic identity in general.

As in many societies, Pomaks' socio-cultural structure and their level of relationships and interactions among agencies show great diversity. Selecting the quantitative research method is considered necessary in order to obtain healthy data and to be able to discuss this complex structure from a deep and meaningful perspective. One of the most important conditions of understanding a society is to understand its social references, the basic dynamics of social life (Bayyigit, 2003, p. 24). In this context, the field researcher remains faced with the question of what needs to be done in order to understand cultural conditions from the moment it is assimilated by the people whose culture the field researcher is trying to understand, follow, and present to the world (Malinowski, 2016, p. 72). Field research, being the most important method of cultural studies, is performed in a naturalist framework. Although sociology has prioritized the quantitative method over the qualitative method since Durkheim's suicide study, field studies have for a long time had an important place in the human sciences (Edles, 2006, pp. 190–195). Güvenç (2015, p. 64) stated that field research has value not from the table top, written resources, or books but in the degree of difficulty because this means the researcher collects information personally from the field and conducts investigations in an area that is foreign.

The sociocultural structures of Pomaks living in the districts and villages of Kırklareli form the topic of this study. Kırklareli is a city where immigrants who've come from the Balkans live extensively. This study will perform a sociological analysis on Pomaks' elements such as their family and kinship relations, architecture, marriage processes, languages, work styles, social ceremonies, food culture, and solidarity networks. The aim of this study is to be able to contribute to the literature on Pomaks by revealing the sociocultural structure of Pomaks living in Kırklareli and

analyzing the components that form this structure. Pomaks live in various provinces in Turkey, such as Eskişehir, Samsun, Bursa, Çanakkale, and Balıkesir. This research only covers Pomaks living in Kırklareli. Providing a contribution to understanding the social structures of the Pomaks settled here forms the aim of this study.

### Method

The qualitative method is preferred in this study because the purpose is to define and interpret the culture of a specific group. Qualitative thinking is built upon five main points: basing the research firmly on the *relevance-to-subject* principle, *describing* the research subject, the importance given to *interpretation*, investigating the subject *in its own natural environment*, and lastly understanding the *generalization process* before extracting the results (Mayring, 2011, p. 25). These postulates constitute the framework of qualitative thinking.

The maximum-diversity and snowball (chain) sampling methods, from the purposeful sampling methods used in qualitative research, have been used together while selecting the sample in the study. While designing the interviews, care was taken to have the interviewees be people who could offer information from both rural and urban sides. Additionally, in order to be able to identify Pomak settlements, determining the places where Pomaks lived homogeneously has been attempted by asking each participant in which district center and in which villages in Kırklareli do Pomaks extensively live. According to the information obtained from the participants, Pomaks live extensively in approximately 25-30 villages. In addition, although not extensive, a portion of the Pomak population is also found in district centers and other villages. Interviews have been performed in 14 Pomak villages, in addition to district centers and the provincial center being included in the study group.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis section of this study, titled *A Sociological Research on Pomaks: The Case of Kırklareli*, is based on the descriptive approach. Firstly, the audio recordings that occurred in the in-depth interviews have been decoded. The data has been organized according to the themes the research questions were composed of; direct quotations have been frequently included in order to strikingly reflect what the interviewees had said.

### Limitations of the Research

The difficulties of the research have been that some of the quite timid behavior of some of the female participants who had been interviewed during the field research and who lived in villages; older female participants refrained from giving information

because they thought the researcher was a TV personality or they went off-topic by constantly complaining about the agricultural policies of the men engaged in farming while presuming the researcher to be a government official.

## Findings

### Family Structure

The concept of family is very important for Pomaks. Even seventh-generation relatives are as close as core family members for Pomaks. Pomaks who have come to Kırklareli through migration visit their relatives that stayed in Bulgaria or Greece as much as possible. Pomaks have stated being more connected to each other due to being a community that has experienced the *trauma of migration*. These days, the number of children in Pomak families does not exceed two. At the time when the Pomak population had been gathered more in villages, children were evaluated as a *labor force* because of the livelihood provided through agriculture and animal husbandry; today, the tendency is to have a small number of children similar to the Thrace region due to mechanization of agriculture, increase in education levels, and challenging economic conditions.

The Pomaks stated never discriminating between sons and daughters; in fact, they stated daughters to be held in higher regard. In the same way, the importance given to education oriented toward youths becoming civil servants and state work being considered better than “the best trades or mercantilism” is an attitude expressed not only in the Pomaks but one seen in Thrace too.

### Forms of Work/Occupations

Pomaks are seen to formerly have had the sole livelihood of agriculture and livestock. Some Pomaks, albeit few in number, were also been noted to be lumberjacks and carpenters. The role of breeding cattle was enormous in determining the places Pomaks would live after migrating. Many families abandoned the place they had been settled in post-migration *on the grounds that they could not raise livestock*; they settled in villages near fields where sheep could flock and graze. These days, no professional branch is found where Pomak youths are being particularly directed. Pomaks generally want their children to have “a job under state guarantee.”

Pomaks stated having the opportunity to make wine grapes in some villages, even being encouraged by the state; however, people stated not wanting to produce wine because it is “objectionable to the religion.”

## Solidarity Networks

Pomaks are considered to be a community that *does whatever it can* on the matter of helping each other. This matter was particularly emphasized by the interviewees in many interviews. By taking an institutional state, these assistances in village life have emerged as *mejis* (collaborations) that have a pivotal place in Pomaks' lives. Meji is the name given to finishing the everyday work of the home by gathering the neighbors at times when the agriculture of the villagers who provide the husbandry and agricultural livelihood has yet to be modernized and both working the land and doing husbandry are *completely based on manpower*. For example, because jobs like peeling corn, weeding sunflowers, making tarhana, rolling dough, plowing fields, building homes, and building roads require a lot of time and labor, and also because the villagers cannot come up with the money to hold on to workers for getting these jobs done, these tasks are done in turns. Peoples' jobs that have been designated in line are done; thus everyone's work is seen within unity and togetherness. Mejis previously have had more than another social function aside from the cooperation from doing jobs together. The people who gather after finishing the meji eat, chat, and even play games accompanied by reed instruments and drums; this has transformed the meji period into a *slice of time that is looked forward to in village life*. Pomaks, recounting their memoirs of mejis, said the topic of whose meji would be done that day would be talked about with enthusiasm at the village coffeehouse, and the young girls and boys of the village have the opportunity to talk to one another at the meji.

Pomaks in recent years have been seen establishing Pomak Associations in provinces such as Eskişehir, Çanakkale, Bursa, and Istanbul. Through the efforts of these associations, Pomak language courses have been opened and youths are encouraged to learn the Pomak language. In addition, Pomaks have exchanged opinions and information with each other through the mediation of these associations and their social media accounts on various subjects such as food, migration stories, weddings, festivities, Pomak settlement sites, and the Pomak language.

## Religion

In the interviews done with the Pomaks, one can say the relationship Pomaks have with religion must be handled in two distinct ways. The reflections on religion and life practices that include religion for Pomaks living in the part of Pomak villages connected to Babaeski, which is located around Büyük Mandıra Beldesi in the region known as Pomak Mandıra and the religious perceptions and lifestyles of Pomak villages in the regions north of Kırklareli such as Skopje, Armağan village, and Kurudere are very different from one another.

The data obtained here from Pomak settlements in regions near the Meriç River show Pomaks do not give importance to religious commands and prohibitions such as the five

daily prayers, going to Jumah prayer, and not consuming alcohol. Pomak settlements in the North show a completely opposite attitude toward this. The first thing Pomaks say about themselves here is that they are “conservative.” This situation is also striking in the visits made to the villages. For example, despite Büyüyük Mandıra Beldesi being a small settlement, it is home to many alcoholic venues. Alcohol is also found in grocery stores and coffee shops. No place is encountered where alcohol is not served. The number of people who go to the mosque at prayer times is said to be very little. In the Pomak settlements in the North, alcoholic venues are very rarely encountered; these places are generally just outside of the village and operate in a secluded place. Here the concentration that forms is carried over in mosques even at prayer times.

Some people interviewed around Babaeski stated that they had immigrated and come here together with Kavasoglu Ibrahim Paşa, that “they are educated people because they are involved in the bureaucracy,” and that “there would be no religion in places where there was education.” For example, the long full coat and white headscarf, which are said to be the traditional dress of Pomak women, are not used. In other villages, Pomak women still wear the black full coat while going outside. When asked the reason for this, they said the long full coat is “a symbol of mourning for relatives that had been lost on the road or in battle” for those who had come in the first migrations; later on women when it had *acquired a religious state*, women removed this and said their veil and “the veil in the religion of Islam are very different things.”

The Pomaks in other regions stated “being very connected to their religion.” They said they give a lot of importance to the five daily prayers and “Those who don’t go to Jumah prayer cannot be a Pomak.” A social control mechanism can be said to have been developed where in *those who don’t go to Jumah prayer are determined, reproached, and warned*.

The interviewees said field work was not done on Fridays in the villages of old; people stayed at home for fear that going to remote fields would cause one to miss Jumah because Friday is the day of Jumah prayer.

### **Various Beliefs and Practices**

As with every society, Pomaks also have a number of different beliefs and practices. Although the interviewees said these beliefs had lost their validity these days, the traces of some practices that had been applied quite strongly at one time can still be seen today. For example, new born babies and the mothers going outside for 40 days after the birth not being good was stated in the interviews. Another tradition that is still practiced similar to this is to not bring two new born babies side by side until their fortieth day, through the idea of “mixing in the 40-day olds.” In the same way, mother’s milk being instilled in the new born baby’s eyes and ears still continues through the

belief that it protects from illness. Another belief is that a woman who has just given birth doesn't take a bath after the al-Zuhr azan until the fortieth day occurs. Also, when the baby is 40 days old, going outside on that day is considered necessary; if they stay at home, something is believed will happen to the baby or mother.

Another practice from old days believed to work in Pomak villages is tying the mouth of the shears. Tying the shears was described as a prayer said by a teacher for keeping an animal from being torn apart by wolves when it has gone missing in the process of bringing back the sheep or cattle from grazing. This tradition is called "tying the wolf's mouth." Similarly, tying the shears on the coldest night of winter, also called Orthodox Christmas Eve, is believed will protect the animals throughout the year.

One of the oldest beliefs too is the belief about seeing the person you will marry on Hidrellez (May 6th), where the night before you pray Salah and go to bed without speaking to anyone. Another way to practice this tradition is to take a bite of bread without swallowing it and going to sleep; that night is thought the one you will marry will come to your dream. Again, washing white laundry and leaving rope laid out the week before Hidrellez is believed to bring bad luck to the home. This week is called the Empty Week. Pomaks expressed not believing in such things these days.

These beliefs and practices, which occur in different versions everywhere in Turkey, can be said to have common cultural elements from communities that deal with agriculture and animal husbandry. Consequently, these beliefs and practices are considered to not be specific to Pomaks but that traces of the same beliefs and practices can be encountered everywhere in Anatolia.

## **Weddings**

Formerly, introductions in Pomaks, where arranged marriages are not very common, were said to occur around fountains, on Hidrellez, at weddings, and at mejis. According to what was described in the interviews, adults give youths a right to be flexible and in this respect tolerate youths, being aware of the aspect these mentioned social events have in preparing the groundwork for marriage. For example, mejis are an eagerly anticipated event for the men of the village. At mejis, men have many ways to confide in the women they love. For example some of these ways are to throw a walnut onto the dough tray of the girl he wants to marry at a couscous meji, helping the girl he loves at the sunflower and corn meji, and singing folk songs at mejis by implying they love each other.

Another original practice related to Pomaks is the ritual of requesting the girl; after at least three repetitions the girl is given. The family of the candidate for husband first goes to the girl's home on Friday or Monday evening. If the introduction is positive,



the second request happens on the following Monday or Friday. The third request again happens the next Friday or Monday. In other words, the groom and bride are contracted within a total of seven days after the third request is performed, with the condition being it is on a Friday or Monday. The groom is called to the home during the putting on of the ring.

The fact that Pomak youths no longer *wish to live with the family* has practically led to the disappearance of Pomak life traditions in the extended family.

### **Prayers for Rain**

Prayers for rain are a rather important tradition in Pomak villages. These prayers are arranged in the month of May. These days, the prayers for rain have taken an institutional state where the Pomak villages come together, wriggling free of its original meaning and Pomaks have the opportunity for a month to see each other and become acquainted and close. Organizing the prayers for rain is done as follows: Each village leader dictates the day he wants to make the prayer for rain by going to the Kırklareli Mufti Office. Here the decision is made jointly with the village leaders, and which day each village's prayer for rain will be done is determined. Information on the time and location that was individually determined for each village is announced to the villagers from the speakers of the mosque for all villages where the prayer for rain will be done. Later, a truck is rented, and this truck goes about the village. Every household donates to support the prayer for rain. These donations can be in the form of sheep, cattle, wheat, flour, or money. The men perform sacrifices at the place where the prayer for rain will be held and start to cook the meat from these sacrifices. Anyone who wants can participate in the prayer for rain, in addition to the imams from nearby villages, the Kırklareli Mufti, and the district mayors. The imams make the prayer together, and then the meals start to be served. In some villages, because the place where the prayer had been done before is no longer appropriate, a hall is said to be rented for gathering using the village budget.

### **Food Culture**

Pomak food can be considered as *the most prominent area where Pomak culture has been preserved* from the past to the present. Corn is the most basic ingredient in Pomak food culture. Therefore, corn being the main ingredient in the dish *kachamak*, which is the food that first comes to mind when trying Pomak dishes, is not surprising. Kachamak is a dish with the consistency of halva and is made from just cornmeal and water. Pomaks often consume kachamak without a specific meal. Because kachamak has both a low cost and fills for a long time, as well as its practical preparation, it has had an important place for Pomaks who lived in poverty and famine after migrating. Ingredients like roasted meat, butter, molasses, lamb fat, sugar, and sour milk cheese,



which can be consumed together with kachamak, make an accessible meal that can be consumed in accordance with anyone's taste and budget, rich or poor. *Kasha* is the soup form of kachamak, too. The elderly particularly in villages were described as drinking this soup in the morning. Pomaks cook many meals within the home in wood-burning stoves that also have a partial oven. However, with natural gas cooking nowadays, cook stoves and stove heaters (pechka) are about to disappear.

### Language

The data obtained from the field research shows the Pomak language to be in danger of extinction. Of the interviewees, those between 30-50 years old said none of the children knew the Pomak language; though they could understand a little when it is spoken, the children themselves cannot speak it. When asked the reason for this, they said that because they read and write in Turkish they didn't teach the Pomak language with the idea that both "in case their children's educational lives would be affected," as well as "knowing Turkish is enough, knowing the Pomak language is unnecessary."

Some of the Pomaks who had settled in Kırklareli said they had not been hard pressed here when they migrated because their grandfathers had already known Turkish when they first arrived. These Pomaks were identified to have spoken both Turkish and the Pomak language prior to migrating. These days as well, Pomaks living in Bulgaria or Greece are known to prefer speaking Turkish instead of the Pomak language. Therefore, Pomaks who know Turkish don't experience any difficulty in their new place in terms of language and have been able to adapt easily to Kırklareli. According to what the grandchildren of Pomaks who speak no Turkish conveyed, those who only speak the Pomak language have had trouble adapting their lives to here. Difficulties like being unable to express oneself in the places they go (one of the most brutal consequences of immigration), the inability to defend oneself, and being unable to explain one's troubles become inevitable for Pomaks who don't know Turkish.

Some of the interviewees conveyed that their relatives who had first immigrated had been prohibited from speaking the Pomak language at school. Memories were described in the direction of complaints to teachers by the national unification patrols established at schools about speaking the Pomak language and being punished by sometimes paying money and sometimes being beaten.

Based on many Pomaks in the field research defining themselves as "statist," "nationalist," or "Turk," the *reluctance Pomaks experienced on the topic of speaking their language or teaching it to their children* is considered to have sourced the idea that having a language other than Turkish would harm their Turkish identity.

## Discussion

Culture is a lifestyle that ensures continuity, is kept alive through the traditions of a community, and is inherited from generation to generation. From this perspective, culture is a reality people constantly rediscover and is a representation of facts (Kartari, 2014, p. 29). In order to not get lost and be able to adapt under the changing conditions, the cultural structure must change and be able to struggle with difficult conditions (Haviland, Prins, Walrath, & McBride, 2008, p. 132). Pomak culture has also undergone certain changes in order to be able to continue its existence after living the immigration experience. Erol Güngör (1993, p. 31) defined the concept of cultural change as "... the old styles of solving or the old means to satisfaction being unable to adapt to new situations; namely, the adoption of new ways when needs cannot be met."

Weber (Schroeder, 1996, pp. 24–26) mentioned the three dimensions of cultural change: The first is routinizing, the second is the impact of change over life spheres, and the third is the change in the community's internal logic. Pomaks who have immigrated to Kırklareli experience a state of continuous cultural interaction together with communities such as Bosnians, Thessaloniki immigrants, those migrating for religion, those from Dağ, the Gypsies, and the Ghazals. As a natural result of this cultural interaction, many Pomak traditions have over time started to resemble the traditions of the communities where they share the same village or neighborhood. A number of changes happen due to the routinizing of certain new behaviors and forms of activity in the Pomaks' social structure, and these new forms/syntheses make their lives easier. Cultural encounters allow elements original to Pomak rituals to emerge. Patterns of accepted behavior, values, and norms are subjected to a synthesis within the Pomak culture, and the social structure is maintained by adapting the new formats to the old (Turhan, 1959, pp. 108–109).

The characteristic structure of Pomak culture has these days begun to show characteristics similar to those from Thrace. Pomaks internally-closed life tendencies have changed over time. Youths, whose interactions with the outside have increased due to the expansion of education and training, the development of mass media, and new job opportunities, have played an important role in the change that Pomaks' homogenous structure has undergone over time.

When mentioning traditions, one thing was stated where representatives and preservers are found. Tradition is the traditium formed in the past, executed, and transferred. It contains material objects, beliefs in all kinds of things, people and events, practices, and institutions (Shils, 2003, pp. 110–111). The traditional features the village environment possesses allow the opportunity for keeping the Pomak sociocultural structure with the most distinctive and vibrant form in villages. Villages, being the place where the Pomak language is spoken in daily life and is conveyed to the younger generation even if just a little, have a more advantageous position compared to the central regions. The elderly population, who are the transmitters of tradition, also mostly lives in villages.

However, weak development in rural areas and village life being insufficient on the point of meeting all basic needs such as a person's education, health, and transportation have caused ruptures in Pomak culture. In this context, village life should be removed from one sum of disadvantages in order to reduce the rapid migration to central regions. Education in villages can only be carried out up to middle school; youths who want a high school education have to locate in the central regions. By closing several of the large sugar mills and dairy farms with broad employment capacities that had been established near villages, the population of working youths has also completely migrated. Because agriculture and animal husbandry, villagers' basic source of income, are found troublesome by youths and don't generate an income matching their difficulty, these jobs are not preferred, and this is the most important factor triggering migration to the city.

When focusing on the discussions related to those with Bulgarian, Greek, Ancient Slavic, or Macedonian origins, the question of what the remaining Pomaks feel about their state of self-belonging is considered more important than hypotheses related to their identity. In this context, both the results obtained from other field studies and the similarity and integration of Pomak culture with Turkish culture that has been seen in the results of this study show that Pomaks stating to be Turks corresponds to a sociological reality. In cultural changes, Kroeber and Sorokin claimed change in a culture to first take place in the spiritual culture, contrary to the Marxist view that claims change to appear primarily in the material culture and the material culture to lead cultural changes while spiritual culture regularly lags behind the material culture. In other words, change first occurs in the mind, and then the projections of these changes in social life begin to be seen concretely (Sorokin, 1972, p. 260). Therefore, the cultural and sociological structures being intertwined in a way that also supports these discourses with Pomaks defining themselves during this field study as "nationalist," "statist," "the origin of the Turk," and "the Ottoman aides," are phenomena that constantly recreate one another. According to Benedict (2011, pp. 16–22), every culture makes its choice from a network of possibilities, and this choice gives that culture its special pattern. By explaining the integration Pomaks' have experienced with Turkish and Anatolian culture, the presence of this choice can be considered as the one answer.

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