

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN THE PROMOTION AND PRESERVATION OF GORANI CULTURAL IDENTITY IN KOSOVO AND METOHIJA

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of teaching staff on promoting and preserving Gorani identity in Gorani schools in Kosovo within the Serbian educational system. The researchers employ a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and semi-structured interviews. Seventh and eighth-grade students from five primary schools and third and fourth-year high school students were surveyed. Interviews were conducted with the principals of each school and one teacher per school, except for one school where communication could not be established. The structured survey includes 16 questions (one open-ended), based on a 5-point scale, aiming to assess the effectiveness of teachers in promoting Gorani culture, students' knowledge of the culture, students' participation in cultural activities, and students' interest in preserving Gorani heritage. Our findings indicate that schools play a significant role in cultural preservation and promotion. However, the full potential of the school system in this regard has yet to be realized, as cultural knowledge transfer largely depends on the enthusiasm and self-initiative of the teaching staff. The main challenges are not solely curricular, as teachers often use certain lessons to promote Gorani culture but are also influenced by Kosovo's complex political and social landscape. While financial support from Belgrade is available, there is a lack of initiative from both authorities and schools. This study also suggests two key areas for future research: first, a comparative study including Albanian- and Bosnian-language schools could enhance understanding of parallel educational systems in post-conflict settings. Second, an exploration of the Gorani community's position within the broader political landscape of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the Brussels process could provide further insight.

Keywords: Gorani, Gorani community, Gorani identity, Serbia, Serbian educational system in Kosovo*, post-conflict education,

Field: Social sciences, sociology

1. INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE REVIEW AND GOAL OF RESEARCH

The Gorani community has been the subject of academic research since Russian ethnographer Ivan Yastrebov (2018) visited Gora—the region located in today's Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia—in the nineteenth century. In 1955, Milisav Lutovac, a member of the Serbian Academy of Science, visited the region and made the same remarks as Yastrebov: Gorani are Serbs who speak the Serbian language. Earlier that century, Yordan Ivanov (1905), a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, presented a thesis that Gorani are Bogomils and, as such, are part of the Bulgarian diaspora. This thesis produced two interesting variations. First, Nazif Dokle (2011), a Gorani and Albanian author, reiterates that Gorani are Bogomils but concludes that the thesis speaks in support of their Macedonian identity. The second variation of the "Gorani as Bogomils" thesis flows as follows: if the members of the Bosnian Church were Bogomils, and if the Gorani were Bogomils and the Bosnian Church was located on the territory of today's Bosnia, then the Gorani are Bosniaks. It hardly needs to be mentioned that there is no evidence that the Bosnian Church was Bogomil, let alone that it has anything to do with today's Bosniaks; the only medieval source referring to Bogomils in Bosnia is almost certainly a forgery (Malcolm, 1996, p. 31).

Although it is difficult to dispute the Islamization of the Orthodox population in Gora (e.g. Katić, 2021), the origin and history of the Gorani still remain a subject of debate in contemporary literature. It also finds its place in pseudo-scientific works; see Fikret Hafizović, a retired mathematics teacher, and also the ideas of Sulejman Aličković. Further, linguistic circles are partially repeating divisions from the debate on the origins of the Gorani. Thus, Božidar Vidoevski considers Gorani speech to be a Macedonian dialect from the Western Macedonian region (Steinke, 2017), while Bulgarian linguists view it as part of the Bulgarian-Macedonian dialect continuum (Koleva, 2012), and Radivoje Mladenović (2001) argues Gorani is a mixture of Serbian and Macedonian. Unlike history and language, which are politically and academically challenging issues, Gorani culture is well documented and consists of complementary works. Thus, the central elements of Gorani culture are folk costumes (Đorđević Crnobrnja, 2015), folk music (Ranković, 2016), the celebration of Đurđevdan (Pavlović, 2021), weddings and marriage practices

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(Ђорђевић Црнобрња, 2018), migrations (Markov, 2020), and mythology (Petreska, 2008).

Education is about the Gorani community remains an under-researched area. Apart from Milenović (Миленовић, 2010), who gives us an account of the education of the Gorani community from 1918 to 2008, the authors did not find any other research. The main reason is quite simple: the vast majority of Gorani in Kosovo and Metohija perceive Serbia as their homeland since they are educated within the Serbian system in the Serbian language. However, the opening of Gorani schools in Albanian and Bosniak, the penetration of ideas of pseudo-historians among young Goranians, as well as the general challenges faced by the Serbian education system in Kosovo, make the scientific study of Gorani education essential. We decided to address this very political topic in an apolitical way with the question: What is the role of teachers in majority Gorani schools in the promotion and preservation of Gorani culture?

2. RESEACH FRAMEWORK

We employed a mixed methods approach that allows us to use both quantitative and qualitative methods—in our case, a structured survey and semi-structured interviews. The results were collected simultaneously between March and May 2024 and then analyzed at the same time. The schools that participated in the process are as follows: elementary schools “22. December” in Restelica (12 students, all eighth grade), “5. October” in Kruševo (16 students, seventh and eighth grade), “Nebojša Jerković” in Ljubovište/Dragaš (10 students, all 8th grade), “25. maj” in Vranište (2 students in seventh and eighth grade), and “Zenuni” in Brod (10 students, all eighth grade), as well as the economics and trade high school (8 students)—with a total of 56 participants in the survey. Additionally, the principal and one teacher from each school were interviewed. It should be noted that of the elementary schools that teach in the Serbian language, we were only failed to establish communication with the school “9. May” in Rapca. It is worth noting that, in certain schools, lessons are taught in Bosnian (“December 22,” “October 5,” “Zenuni”) and Albanian (“December 22”). Not including schools in other languages should not be seen as a limitation of this work, but as a hint of future research that, in addition to building on our results, could provide insights into the parallel educational systems in post-conflict societies.

The structured survey contained a total of 16 questions (with the fourth question being open-ended) on a 5-point scale to investigate not only the effectiveness of teachers in promoting Gorani culture and experience in class but also students’ knowledge of Gorani culture, students’ participation in activities linked to the promotion of the Gorani culture, and students’ interest in preserving Gorani cultural heritage. Surveys were sent to school principals beforehand to inform parents about the content and obtain their consent. Finally, on the scheduled day, the students filled out surveys in the presence of their teachers. Although we had the option to extend the survey to all grades because it would not be expensive and time-consuming (the classic challenges of a census survey), we decided to include only eighth graders and in certain schools seventh graders. Including all grades would increase the burden on schools (Bethlehem, 2009).

The interviews are semi-structured and, as previously mentioned, include school principals and one teacher per school. In the initial phase, the principals were contacted with information about the research with guarantees that the questions would be exclusively related to the role of teachers in preserving Gorani culture. Given the complexity of the political situation, including the place of Serbian education in Kosovo and Metohija, we have found that the a priori exclusion of political topics can encourage people to participate in research. After a positive reaction, we sent surveys and interview topics. Therefore, the respondents were familiar with the nature of the research. Prior to the interviews, participants filled out the consent form in which they noted whether the interview could be recorded or the researcher would take notes, gained an understanding of with rights and obligations of each party, and said whether we could use their names and affiliations. Out of ten interviewees, only three requested to remain anonymous. Although only three respondents requested anonymity, we opted to anonymize all interviewees. The interviews were conducted by the co-author, a member of the Gorani community, which enabled us to have easier access to the interviewees and bypass the potential issue of community member-outsider interaction impacting the interview (Banks, 1998); though there are authors who challenge this dichotomy (see Berger, 2013). Other potential challenges appear when an individual researches their own community, such as emotions (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016) or solidarity (Augustin, 2020); however, these have been overcome by the constant contact of all co-authors during the research and joint result interpretation. Also, in the case of surveys and interviews, all documents are stored according to valid regulations.

Before presenting the results, three more points need to be acknowledged; these are reflected in the discussion section of the paper. First, although we decided to address this topic through apolitical research questions, the influence of politics on the education system is undeniable and we must not neglect the

influence of education in building political cohesion, political socialization, and a culture of political action (Bazić, 2012). Then, we accept that formal education is important, but it is also only one of the elements in preserving the culture of a community in addition to other aspects such as language, (UNESCO, 2003), traditional wisdom and practice (Sillitoe, 2009), and holidays and cultural manifestations (Getz, 2010). Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the destruction of material monuments and institutions, which play a role in transmitting the culture, history, and collective memory of a community, in Kosovo has removed bearers of cultural and historical messages; this interrupts the messages' intergenerational transmission and leads to the erasure of the collective memory of that community (Vučković, 2022).

3. RESULTS

Surveys

The questions were divided into four themes: 1. Knowledge and participation; 2. Importance and interest; 3. Activities and engagement; and 4. Teacher effectiveness and future initiatives. There are no significant differences in the answers between elementary school and high school students, which is why the results are not separated. The fourth question is open-ended and concerns participation in activities as well as lessons in class that focus on Gorani culture. The most common response regarding activities was "Đurdevdan", followed by mentions of "wedding", and "wearing national costume". In terms of lessons on Goran culture, typical student responses included: "we don't have such lectures, but teachers sometimes connect the class with Goran culture", and "some teachers, if something from the lesson associates them with a tradition, then they explain it to us". Additionally, some students associated Goran culture with their music classes, stating: "in music culture, we have classes where we learn more about our Goran costume and culture" and "we listen to Goran music in the music culture class".

Regarding the answers on the 5-point scale: students believe that they are well acquainted with Gorani culture and tradition (average score 4.07), while they rated the frequency of participation in activities related to Gorani culture as 3.39. Their experiences in the classes show that there is room for improvement (3.11) but also that there is interest in learning about Gorani culture as well as a desire for more cultural events. However, students believe that teachers are relatively successful in involving students with a score of 3.70. Additionally, our respondents believe that learning from culture can be useful with a score of 3.88, and they perceive the preservation of Gorani cultural heritage as very important with a score of 4.39. However, they rate their involvement, the likelihood of recommending ideas, and their interest in participating in future initiatives only at just above the average grades between 3.3 and 3.7; they said that learning about Gorani culture has a moderately positive impact on understanding cultural diversity with 3.68. Finally, students strongly support the introduction of a special subject that would focus on Gorani culture with a score of 4.13.

Interviews

The interview was designed around five topics: 1. General queries; 2. Gorani culture and education system; 3. The integration and promotion of Gorani culture; 4. Support of the school administration, local and educational authorities, and 5. suggestions for improvement.

The first group of questions enabled the researchers to get to know the interviewees and the schools. School "25. maj" started operating in 1922 and today classes are held in two shifts in the Serbian language; "Nebojša Jerković" has been working continuously since 1948 and has four departments outside its main building; "5. oktobar" was founded in 1963 in Kruševo, but, since 2006, classes have been held in Glubočica; "Zenuni" in Brod existed since 1930 and it has branches in the villages of Bačka and Dikance. The School of Economics and Trade was founded in 1969 it was operating in the home school in Dragaš, but since 2006 moved to the nearby village of Mlike. It is worth stressing that most of our interviewees have a decade or more of experience in education.

All interviewees believe that they are familiar with Gorani culture. Further, besides two principals who do not see the need to learn about Gorani culture in the school because "there are more than twenty or so national minorities" and it is not "of key importance," the others find that preservation is more than desirable because, as one teacher reminds us, "it is easy to forget culture and tradition if it is not nurtured." One of the principals emphasizes that the elements of Gorani culture should be "available to others so that they can get to know our tradition, culture and all the elements that adorn our community." When it comes to answers linked to the integration and promotion of Gorani culture, they mostly corresponded to the replies received from the students on the fourth question. Thus, art and music classes, where folk songs, costumes, and customs are covered, remain the most common answers. In addition, the interviewees note that certain events usually accompany important dates and anniversaries: "the conditions are difficult, and

we are not able to do anything special, but when it comes to some events such as the 50th anniversary of the school, it's okay whether [...] we organize folklore, recitations, or music, we are simply not able," "through various cultural and artistic events, we celebrate school day, through art exhibitions, etc. One of the ways is that for the third time for every jubilee from the 60s onwards, we issue a newsletter in which we select pages in which we promote our culture and tradition." Some of the interviewees also note the positive reactions of the students to this type of activity: "the children are happy," "they are satisfied," "every student when we come to his field knows something, we give him the freedom to express himself freely, to behave well, to present himself well, and to be completely satisfied."

When asked about the support of the school administration and the authorities responsible for education, teachers' answers vary from "currently we do not receive any support" through "primarily in the part of supporting our demands [...] although for now it is at a minimal level" to "the support is present in every view." One interviewee explains that "the administration, in accordance with its capabilities, and above all due to the specific position of our community in these turbulent times, does not have much space or means to support any cultural content in any way, except for the one for the school day." On the other hand, the director's answers are somewhat different, focusing on the specific help provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the Office for Kosovo, primarily in celebrating school days but also in printing magazines. However, one of the directors adds that, during the external evaluation, they insisted "that we emphasize regular classes as well as where possible, that we promote our culture, language and customs." It seems that the general perception of our interviewees is that there is support but no initiative from the authorities. In other words, the authorities are willing to support school initiatives: "I don't think they are to blame [the authorities], I think it is more our fault because we are not asking for something."

The last part of the conversation was reserved for proposals on how the government can help in the promotion of Gorani culture. Interestingly, although (as expected) they mention the financial aspect in the form of equipment and expansion of the school space, our interviewees more often lead the conversation in several other directions. The first recurring theme was increased autonomy for teacher: "encourage teachers to move beyond templates [...] to have more freedom." Another proposal was broader outreach: "we would be grateful for invitations to showcase our culture outside Gora [...] such as the activities we had in the cultural center in Gračanica and the city school in Klokot to present our culture, language, and customs". Establishing a cultural center or society was also suggested: "A cultural-artistic society with financial backing and workshops for making Goran folk costumes would be a small step forward with a great epoch-making effect in preserving the Goran being. The guarantor of our cultural and historical duration". Finally, one interviewee reminds us of the establishment of the National Council of Goranians and expresses the hope that the Council "through its representatives, among whom I am the chairman of the management board for culture, to find a module in contact with the relevant ministry, so that in the near future Gorani culture studies according to the curriculum of the Republic of Serbia."

4. DISCUSSION

Our quantitative findings demonstrate that young people believe that they know Gorani culture well and that they moderately active in cultural activities at school and above all in the community. Their experience is only satisfactory when it comes to Gorani culture within lessons themselves, and they express interest in learning more about their own culture as well as participating in school activities that promote Gorani culture. This is also confirmed by our interviewees; conversations and lessons about Gorani culture are sometimes included at the initiative of the subject teacher and only when there is an objective opportunity. On the other hand, teachers and directors confirm while students are happy to participate in cultural events, there are relatively few events.

The disparity between students having a strong understanding of their culture despite having few cultural events and classes in school is due to the fact that, as shown by previous research, people's perception and knowledge of tradition, speech, and holidays is nurtured primarily within the family or wider community (Đorđević Crnobrnja, 2014; 2015; 2018). Coming from family environments where local culture is celebrated, the desire to increase cultural events in schools is not surprising. Interestingly, while there is interest in more cultural content at school, students show less enthusiasm for participating in future initiatives and projects. One of the possible explanations for this difference is that participation requires more effort than passive consumption of cultural content.

In addition to the large number of cultural events, students clearly believe that it is important to include lessons about Gorani culture in the curriculum itself. Both their principals and teachers express a desire to include such lessons as well as more extracurricular activities. This is the (obvious) point at

which politics enters the field of education. Although there is very strong general support from Serbia and often specific support for school initiatives, neither side currently sees the promotion of Gorani culture as a priority or their responsibility. For the authorities in Belgrade, it is the preservation of the Serbian education system in Kosovo, while for the Gorani community, the primary goal is survival in Gora. It should be noted that staff in schools, as well as students and their parents, through participation in Serbian institutions, link their future with the Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija. In this context, it would be interesting in subsequent research to analyze the potential role and place of the Gorani community in the Brussels process.

Furthermore, the students rated their involvement as well as their teacher's effectiveness as above average, which matches the answers from the interview and reveals that teachers are making individual efforts. It is also interesting that they believe that learning about Gorani culture has positive effects on the perspective and understanding of cultural diversity. Their observation, or perhaps just intuition, is certainly confirmed in the scientific literature, where understanding one's own culture represents a significant step towards appreciation and respect for cultural diversity—first of all, through the development of self-awareness, empathy, and critical thinking (Baker, 2015).

Finally, students, principals, and teachers all reacted positively to the introduction of a special subject that would focus on Gorani culture. Although there are indeed over twenty national minorities in Serbia, not only would the creation of such a curriculum be almost impossible, but it would also be counterproductive for the cohesion of society. However, considering the political and social circumstances in Kosovo and the active efforts to destroy the material carriers of cultural messages—as well as the educational system of Serbia being one of the few remaining potential carriers of these messages—this idea should not be rejected per se. The introduction of a special subject on Gorani culture, in an ideological sense, signals that the Gorani are part of the Serbian national body with full respect for local cultures. A less ambitious but still impactful idea is the state government creating a platform for exchanging experiences and knowledge between schools in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as schools across the rest of Serbia.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Schools play an important but not essential role in the promotion and preservation of Gorani identity. However, that role is limited by the curriculum, as well as by the political and social situation in Kosovo. The involvement of teachers in the promotion of Gorani culture is mostly self-initiated and takes place in music and art classes. Additionally, schools almost exclusively organize cultural events for the purpose of celebrating important dates. In addition to insufficient time within the curriculum for cultural content, teachers face challenges such as the lack of equipment, limited school space, and sometimes, lack of communication with school administrators. The directors note that there is financial support from the state authorities but no official initiatives that would promote Goran's cultural heritage. Furthermore, our interviewees emphasize that while it is important for them that the voice of the Gora community is heard outside the territory of Gora, there are few initiatives coming from the schools themselves.

During this study, two interesting topics for future research emerged. First, comparative research that encompasses bilingual and multilingual schools can contribute to the general understanding of parallel education systems in post-conflict societies. Second, there is no literature that indicates, in the case of full implementation of the Brussels documents and the Ohrid Proposal, the place and role that the Gorani community occupies. For example, would schools with a Goran majority remain in the Serbian system or would majority Goran schools in Kosovo become part of the Community of Serbian Municipalities?

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