Preserving Historical Heritage: The Case of Salih Ağa of Paşmaklı, the Pomak Governor of the Ahı Çelebi Kaza of the Ottoman Empire (1798–1838)

This chapter deals with the person and legacy of Salih Ağa of Paşmaklı within the context of the hotly disputed Pomak heritage in Bulgaria. Salih is the most famous, but “forgotten” Pomak governor of the small Ottoman province of Ahı Çelebi from the first half of the nineteenth century. Relying largely on orally transmitted ethnographic documentation, I reconstruct the life story of a fascinating ruler who registers in local memory as tough—indeed, often ruthless—but relentlessly evenhanded enforcer of justice. Most notably, he elevated the status of Christians to that of Muslims in Ahı Çelebi despite the religious discrimination inherent in Shari‘a, the normative law of the Ottoman Empire.

One major problem that prevents the construction of standard narrative histories of Pomak heritage in general, and about Salih Ağa in particular, is the lack of direct historical evidence. That is, within the larger framework, Pomak heritage does not exist—at least, not officially. Historically, Pomak heritage has been traditionally subsumed into, initially, Ottoman-Muslim and, subsequently, Bulgarian historiography. For Ottoman historians, the Pomaks were peripheral local people, largely indistinguishable from the larger mass of Muslim subjects, who were not even remarkable for causing trouble. Subsequently, for Bulgarian nationalism, “Pomak” became and remains a forbidden name, ostensibly liable to spell ethnic divisions and territorial disputes.

Plainly and simply, then, Pomak history does not explicitly exist in recorded history. Instead, it must be gleaned out of whatever historical evidence there is, both oral and recorded. In Salih Ağa’s case, as a highly local and fairly minor Ottoman governor, he should be largely absent from the annals of Ottoman history. But hunting for any snippets of information that may have survived

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1 The Ottoman state had a tripartite level of administrative government based on territorial districts: (1) the largest administrative unit was vilayet and it was ruled by the highest ranking-governor paşa (pasha); (2) the next, smaller unit was sancak (sandzhak); and (3) the third and smallest was kaza, the later two ruled by lesser governors (ağas). The Ahı Çelebi Kaza was part of the Gümürçina (Gumurdzhina) Sancak within the Vilayet of Edirne, the Province of Rumelia.
about him in various Ottoman archives, would be more trouble that worth for the purpose of this chapter, because of a language barrier, among other things. More importantly, it is known that the archive from Salih's time as administrator of Ahı Çelebi was destroyed during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913. While the construction of Pomak histories may be difficult, however, it is not impossible. This chapter sets out to (re-)claim Salih Ağa and his legacy as a Pomak heritage.

I develop the story on the basis of surviving archival evidence as well as abundant oral stories and legends about Salih. Because of the incompleteness of the existing sources, however—at least in the sense that they recount episodic stories about Salih, rather than provide any comprehensive account of his life—my goal is far from any kind of biography of the governor. Instead, I attempt to reveal him the way he has survived in local memory by piecing together the available information. Because Salih lived and ruled in turbulent times, his—in many ways—conventional achievements stand out as a staggering feat of moral integrity, justice, and pursuit of order.

Finding Salih Ağa

Salih Ağa is a fascinating character to study. But the governor particularly matters within the discourse of Pomak heritage because—as my friend Ivan Terziev once said—his positive legacy of equitable treatment of Muslims and Christians in Ahı Çelebi could be a potent “unifying factor” of the Rhodopean communities of both faiths today. The combination of Salih’s fascinating presence in the indigenous folklore and the rather limited surviving records about him make this relatively obscure Ottoman governor an extremely desirable, but equally challenging candidate for study.

Although I was born in the Western Rhodopes not far from the place where Salih lived and ruled, I had never heard about him before the summer of 2007 when I delved into the region's history. Salih Ağa became the forgotten governor of Ahı Çelebi for two correlated reasons: (1) After the country gained independence from Ottoman rule, Bulgaria’s national historiography associated him with the former “Turkish oppressors,” and, consequently, (2) the official memory chose to ignore Salih’s legacy. The Rhodopean community today remembers little beyond the name Salih, which is frequently mentioned in vernacular references to prominent local sites, such as “The Gorge of Salih Ağa” (presently, the Waterfall of Smolyan) and “The Konak of Salih Ağa.”

The place I encountered Salih Ağa’s name is Smolyan, a city of about forty thousand inhabitants today, formerly known as Paşmaklı. For almost a