

January 1975

# The Pecalba Tradition in Macedonia, A Case Study

Joel Halpern

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst, [jmhalpern@anthro.umass.edu](mailto:jmhalpern@anthro.umass.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Halpern, Joel, "The Pecalba Tradition in Macedonia, A Case Study" (1975). *Anthropology Department Faculty Publication Series*. 58.  
[https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro\\_faculty\\_pubs/58](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_faculty_pubs/58)

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Department Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

96

V. V. V. V.

THE PECALBA TRADITION IN MACEDONIA: A CASE STUDY

Translated and edited by  
Joel and Barbara K. Halpern  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Translated and edited by

Joel and Barbara K. Halpern

The following narrative has been excerpted from an account by a pravoslavni (Eastern Orthodox Christian) peasant from a village in the hills above Struga, near Lake Ohrid. It is especially interesting for historical perspective on the social ties and obligations between Orthodox and Moslem villagers, often members of the same village community, particularly with regard to the carrying out of pecalba, the migrant labor pattern characteristic of this region.

All our villages below Mt. Jablanica, and especially those around Drimkol, have had pecalba since Turkish times. It is still preserved today. In Turkish times our pecalbari used to go to work in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. Those who sympathized with the Serbs, and those who later had Serbian schools in their villages, went on pecalba in Serbia. These were workers from villages such as Labuniste, Podgorac and Borovac, an area known even today as "little Sumadija."<sup>2</sup> Workers from places like Vevzane and Ektise used to go to Romania, and those from Jablanica, Bezeva and Visni usually went to Bulgaria. This is what happened in Turkish times, and this tendency had a political character.

The pecalbari used to travel to their jobs on horses provided by kiradzije, Moslem men who specialized in renting horses and guiding and escorting the workers. Each kiradzija had 3 to 5 horses for this purpose. Almost all the kiradzije in our area were from my village, but they served workers from the entire region. With their help, workers could travel to Belgrade in 17 or 18 days. Two poorer workers would hire one horse. A more prosperous man would rent one for himself and his bags, his bed-roll and food.

The kiradzije, being Moslem, could best communicate with the Turkish police guards, who were posted at every important place on the road in order to control travelers. Each pecalbar would give a guard a small bribe to avoid delays and baggage checks. If not, the police would detain them for an hour or

<sup>1</sup> From field research in southwestern Macedonia in 1962

<sup>2</sup> A region in central Serbia

more. Often our people carried arms for Serbia, carefully concealed in the saddle-bags. In that case, the pecalbari would heavily tip the kiradzije in order to avoid being turned in to the Turkish authorities.

On times of need, the families of the workers would borrow money from the Moslem carriers; the kiradzije trusted them and would get their money back when they visited Belgrade or wherever the men or those families were working. Thus there was great confidence between the Moslem kiradzije and the Christian pecalbari.

As for migrant workers who were Moslem, they did not travel far on pecalba. The furthest they would go was to Bitola<sup>3</sup>. Most Moslem men worked at home. They were carpenters and also built houses and made farming tools such as rakes, pitchforks and plows, and also tables, looms and such things. Among the Christians in the villages, only elderly men, those over 60, stayed home.

Pecalbari who were about to set off for work for the first time were visited by friends and relatives who brought them gifts. When a young worker was about to set out for the first trip, the women of his family would fill a container full of water and cover it with a piece of bread. On the side of the water vessel they attached a piece of jewelry of the kind brides wear on their bodices, and they would also fasten on a sprig of dogwood. When this was ready and the young man was about to set out, the container was placed on the threshold of the house. He was supposed to kick it with his right foot, making sure that he did not overturn it. The bread and water represent luck and fortune in the coming work. The dogwood stands for the good health of the worker, and the bride's jewelry is to insure that he will think of his young wife or fiancée, be true to her and return home one day. This is done even today. Dogwood is very strong and resilient and bears a fruit from which drenovica rakija<sup>4</sup> is made.

After the pecalbar leaves his house he is accompanied to the edge of the village by the older men and women. They make jokes so that he will not pine for his wife or fiancée.

All the kiradzije guiding the departing workers would load the horses and set out together, to a point a few kilometers from the village. There they would separate. At this place there was, and still is, a pear tree. Here, at the moment of leave-taking, the fathers, mothers and other relatives would weep near this tree, and therefore this spot is called "The Weeping Pear Tree," for according to local belief not only the people but the tree, too, wept to see the young men leave.

---

<sup>3</sup> The nearby trading center

<sup>4</sup> A type of brandy

People wept because of the length of separation, 2 or 3 or even more years. Also, there was uncertainty during the long absence, because of robbers and murderers, and because of the possibility of illness and death in such faraway places. All these thoughts were on their minds, making the separation in those days a very difficult thing.

After the leave-taking the pecalbari mounted the horses assigned to them and rode off, trying to hide their sorrow and feelings and not let their families see. The kiradzije immediately would start to cheer them up, telling them that they would be lucky, that they would do well, and that they should be happy to be setting off for work, that they should not think back but look ahead, that pecalba will be good and that there will be money for everyone when they return home. They playfully teased the younger men, telling them that they, the same kiradzije, would one day provide horses on their wedding days. They encouraged the workers, saying that they would make the trip in safety. They reassured them that they would not be troubled by the Turkish guards. They said they knew all the gendarmes all the way to Ristovac, the border check-point between Serbia and Turkey.

The escorts also knew all the spots for resting, eating and spending the night. They were familiar with the owners of coffee-houses en route, where the men and horses could be refreshed. They learned this in the course of their constant travels. Inn-keepers kept large supplies of hay and barley for the horses of their patrons. They also provided stables for the houses and rooms for the travelers. In those days a night's lodging cost 3½ gros per person, whether or not one had wine or rakija. Once it happened that a worker from Jablanica had nothing but coffee and some tea. The next morning everyone was charged the usual amount. That man told the inn-keeper "But I did not eat and drink as the others did; so why should I pay the same amount?" The inn-keeper replied, "I do not note what everyone has while he is here. Eating or not eating, 3½ gros." And even today those words are remembered in our villages.

Upon their return from pecalba, workers would bring all kinds of gifts for the members of their households, relatives and friends. In those days, as now, it was shameful if a man did not bring presents for all. A returning worker was visited by all his kin in the village, who welcomed him with a large flat bread and a wooden flask of wine. This was usually done in the evening, after visitors announced which evening they were coming, so that a meal could be prepared for them. Visits were made in the evening because the workers used to return to their villages in December, when nights are long and people could sit and talk for a long time. The returned worker would

talk about the others who remained at their work, and he would talk of his own work, his plans, what to do with his money, and, if he brought home a larger amount of money, how long he would stay at home. If a pecalbar happened to own his own restaurant or milk-shop, and there was a replacement such as a brother, son or other relative, then he would not have to worry about returning immediately and might remain at home for 5 or 6 months.

If a pecalbar worked as a laborer for someone else, then he was obliged to report the time of his return, via the services of a kiradzija. The kiradzije charged a certain percentage for sending letters and money, depending on the amount enclosed. Money sent was in safe hands, and the carriers would turn it over to the workers' families as soon as they arrived in the villages with it.

In times of need, as I have said, families of men away on pecalba could have money advanced to them by the kiradzije. The kiradzije would charge it against an unwritten account. There was great respect and trust on both sides. In those days people would take money without receipts or witnesses, even to amounts of 50 or more golden Napoleons. So it was until about 1920. Afterward, such cases were rare; after 1920 money exchanges were witnesses, or taken from a bank as a loan after two people vouched for it.

After World War I, even though there was a train now running between Bitola and Skopje, pecalbari still used the kiradzije to travel as far as Bitola. From there they went by train to Belgrade. This was the custom up to about 1930. After this, men went by bus to Bitola or Skopje and from there by train.

Even today before workers set out on pecalba, the custom with water vessel, bread, jewelry and dogwood is still practiced. It is the mode of travel which has changed completely. Today there are no more kiradzije. Until 1945 there were 2, who brought goods from Bitola for small village stores.

In the old days pecalbari would work 18 hours a day, under difficult conditions. Many contracted tuberculosis and died young. The high mortality rate was due to the fact that there was no medicine for that disease. Some would try to cure themselves according to prescriptions given by doctors. During the summer they would go up into the mountains to the high pastures, where they lived on milk products. Because of the fresh clean air and good water and food they would heal themselves and prolong their lives. There was a case of a tuberculosis victim from a nearby village who amazed everyone with his home-made cure. For one summer he lived up in the high pastures and completely cured himself. Then he went to work in his father's store in Belgrade. Thanks to his abilities

he expanded the store. Later, in Czechoslovakia, he opened 3 modern confectioners shops in Brno. About 10 years ago he escaped from Czechoslovakia and came to Belgrade, where he now owns and operates a very modern sweet-shop. Everyone was surprised to see this man alive and well, since as a young man he could hardly move and was constantly spitting blood.

Most of the pecalbari from our village worked as waiters in coffee-houses and restaurants, and there were also some who owned such coffee-houses and restaurants. Some were milkmen who worked in Belgrade, Kragujevac and Prilep or other places. There were very few masons, and most of these went to Romania where they earned good money even though they did not lead a comfortable life.

Due to the difficult life of the pecalbari, they began to think in terms of educating their children. So, among the children of our migrant workers who worked in Belgrade there are many people from our village who managed to obtain a higher education. The sons of our pecalbari started to attend night schools, organized especially for the children of workers. During the day these children had to work as apprentices. In Belgrade the first Serbian teachers graduated from the Saint Sava Evening Teachers' School. All three of them were from our village and later got positions as the first teachers in our area.

Gradually it became the custom among Orthodox parents in our village to encourage their children to go on in school. After finishing their schooling people from our village would move on to cities and towns, as called for by their jobs. In this way the number of Orthodox households and of Orthodox villagers decreased while at the same time the number of Moslems, both households and members, has increased. However, many Orthodox villagers have not sold their homes or land, although they no longer reside in the village. They return during the summer for vacations, spending it with relatives in the village. All our college graduates live in big cities, while those who have gotten a highschool education and are now officials have also built houses in the cities and live there.

After the end of World War I, many Moslems from our village began to go on pecalba in Greece, Albania and Turkey. The majority, who remained in Macedonia, worked nearby in Bitola or Prilep. Those who were masons did well, especially those who worked in Turkey. At that time the daily wage for a mason here was 35 dinars. In Turkey they got 120 dinars. Two from our village who worked in Turkey stayed a long time, married there and decided to remain. One of them is still in correspondence with the son of his first wife, who still lives in the village.

Those who went on contract in groups of 7 or 8 masons earned very good money. Two who did well in this way returned from Turkey in 1938 and opened general stores in the village. They also purchased land and built good houses.

As more Moslems began to go on pecalba, certain families, regardless of whether they were Orthodox or Moslem, began to help each other out. In the event that the head of a household was away on pecalba, and no other able-bodied male is at home, friends would come to help with the work in the fields. For instance, in the month of June, when hay is cut, a friend takes over all responsibility, since women do not know how to organize such work. Friends cut the fields, gather the hay and bring it in. They also do the plowing when it is time. If there are no oxen they find someone to bring in oxen, paying for the work or guaranteeing payment when the head of the household returns. If any taxes are due, and the wife of the absent worker has no ready cash, the friend pays and does so as long as the worker is absent. Upon the return of the pecalbar the friends settle their account.

Our Moslem villagers were never interested in giving their children higher education. Therefore, there is no Moslem/ from our village/ with a collage education. A few who do have a highschool education work in the village as local officials. Some Moslem pecalbari who worked for a long time in Prilep, Skopje and elsewhere have moved there families there. All of these men sold their holdings in the village, as owning private property stood in the way of their receiving the so-called children's supplement to their wages.

At the same time, all land which was sold by Orthodox villagers was purchased by Moslems from the villages, as no other Orthodox were interested in buying it. Gradually most Orthodox families are moving away from the village. Those Moslem families who have members of their households working as masons have earned good money in the last 8 years or so, and thus they have been able to purchase property. The Orthodox, who have educated their children, or whose children are currently being educated, cannot cultivate their land and maintain their holdings because of old age or lack of able-bodied workers. They therefore have been selling their land.