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Godfatherhood among Mohammedans, 1889

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Leafing through the folk songs of the Mohammedans in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a careful reader will quite often notice verses mentioning the ritual kinship, godfatherhood [kumovi].

I will quote some verses as examples:

”Lika [1] kumom bio kod djevojke.”..... [2](Lika was godfather to a girl)

”Evo t’ kuma, bega udbinjskoga.”..... [3](Here is your godfather, bey from Udbina)

”Pa mu sinu kosu kumovao”..... [4] (So he was a haircutting godfather to his son)

These verses stirred me up so that I started looking closely into godfatherhood among the Mohammedans themselves. Soon I received a lot of information about this subject, and I simply note here what I had heard.

Our Mohammedans know about three types of godfatherhood as ritual kinship. These are: the best man in a wedding, the haircutting godfatherhood, and the circumcision godfatherhood.

It has been around a hundred years since the custom of having a best man disappeared. After the Ottomans took over Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosniaks, who embraced the faith of the Prophet, kept the custom of best man at a wedding, along with other customs.

This custom has remained preserved the longest as a general custom in Bosanska Krajina, where all the way until the 18th century, Mohammedan used to wed with the Christian girl, without the girl having to convert to Islam. It happens even today, in the vicinity of Kolašin, that a Muslim man marries a Christian woman. The children of such mixed marriages are of Mohammad’s faith, as this is ordered by Muslim religious institutions. Such marriages created the proverb which says: “My father is praying the Muslim way, my mother is crossing herself, and I am turning to stone”.

If, therefore, the folk song from the past centuries mentions that Mustaj–bey from Lika was the best man in the wedding of some hero, there is no doubt that the Mohammedans still generally obeyed the custom to have a best man for their wedding. To be a best man was a special honor, as everyone wanted a remarkable and powerful person to be their best man.

Over time, this custom, which was originally inherited from the Christian past, has been lost and a 'brother-in-law' replaced a best man. There are still some places in Bosanska Posavina where a brother-in-law is called a best man.

Although it is well known in some parts of Bosnia, haircutting godfatherhood [5] has only been preserved in Herzegovina. Herzegovinian Mohammedans decide to be godfathers to the children of their close friends in order to make their friendship stronger not just for themselves but for their descendants as well. This is common not only between the two Mohammedans but between the Mohammedan and Christian as well. This custom is solemnly performed in the house of a child's father in this way: If a male child is born to a Mohammedan, his close friend will announce or he will ask whether the child's father and the householders agree that he will be the godfather to a newborn boy. If they agree, they will decide about the day when that ceremony will be performed. This event happens while the child has not had his first haircut as yet, and the ritual must be performed in the morning, while the day is still young. The child's father invites friends and relatives to come to his house, and they come early in the morning, so that the child's mother can welcome the guests in a very festive manner. The child is dressed in the most beautiful clothes. The godfather takes the child and puts him on his lap. One of the relatives brings a glass or porcelain bowl of clean water, and holds it under the child's neck. The godfather takes the scissors and cuts the child's hair, first above his right ear, then in the middle of his head, and lastly above his left ear. The cut hair drops into the water, which is in the bowl.

When the godfather cuts the hair, he throws some coins into the water as well – as much as he can – five or ten coins or even a ducat or more. The gathered people will also throw some coins in. All the collected money will be split among the servants.

By performing this ceremony, the friend becomes the godfather to this child; from now on, he will be his protector and guardian; he will be helping the child even if his own life was in danger.

The child's mother sends some gifts to the godfather and his family, usually the gift of embroidered and woven things, and the child's father will give a rifle, a sword, a smoking pipe, a horse, or something else to the godfather.

After the ceremony, the feast will be held and everyone will be dancing merrily.

The godfatherhood exists while the godfather or godchild lives; if any of them dies, it is said: "There used to be a godfatherhood, but it was torn apart."

This is similar to the one known before: "The godchild had died, the godfatherhood ceased."

Here are some examples of this godfatherhood:
Famous Smail-aga Čengić was a godfather to his faithful friend's son. This friend was Miko Malović from Dragaljevo in Drobnjaci. The godfatherhood existed between Ded-aga Čengić (the son of Smail-aga) and Montenegrin duke Petar Stevanov (who was the father-in-law to Nicholas I the Prince of Montenegro).

In 1836, an engineer Luchini [6]from Dalmatia (born in Padua), was a godfather to Ibrahim-bey Kapetanović, the son of Ali-bey Kapetanović-Ljubušak. My honest friend Nezir ef. Škalić was a godfather to the son of Osman Gegić in the village of Međeđa in Rogatica in 1860.

Haircutting godfatherhood has greatly influenced social and political relations; it often ended hostility among the two families who have become faithful and trusted friends since the start of their godfatherhood relationship.

Circumcision godfatherhood [7] is very much alike the haircutting godfatherhood.

When a Mohammedan's son is circumcised, the Mohammedan will invite a friend to hold his child as the barber performs the circumcision. From that very moment, this friend will be called 'the godfather' by the child's father, mother, brothers, sisters and all the relatives. The godfather is considered to be the most important friend; he can come to the house at any time; female children do not need to cover their heads when the godfather is in the house. When the godson marries, his bride will bring gifts not only to her husband's family but to his godfather as well. Also, the godfather takes good care of his godchild, especially if the child's father dies; when the godchild needs help or advice, he will always turn to his godfather knowing that he will do anything that is in his power to help.

All three types of godfatherhood are known only by Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in some parts of the Balkan peninsula. To the Ottomans, the godfatherhood is completely unknown and we cannot find even a trace of it in Quran or Shariat.

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Translated by Bojana Vuković

Notes

1. An adjective coming from famous hero called Mustaj-beg lički (Mustaj bey from Lika) ↩
2. "Folk songs of Mohammedans in Bosnia and Herzegovina" II. Book, song LX. verse 1162 ↩
3. "Folk songs of Mohammedans in Bosnia and Herzegovina" II. Book, song LXVII. verse 592 ↩
4. A folk song, not published yet ↩
5. A few days ago Mehmed efendi Šarić from Stolac told me that this type of godfatherhood is known as the confirmation godfatherhood, in the area around Stolac ↩
6. This man Luchini opened a great canal through the field of Ljubuški and thus this

field dried up ↩
7. Sunet (sunnah) is an Arabic word – circumcision ↩

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