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# The livestock production system of the Muslim minority in Northern Evros, Greece

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**Abstract.** The Greek Region of Thrace is the main center of the Greek Muslim minority. Apart from their religion, these people are distinguished by language, attire and customs. In Evros Prefecture, the Muslim minority inhabits the North-western part and mainly consists of Pomaks, a historical highland population who has always lived isolated in mountainous villages. Because of their constant interactions with the natural environment they are used to a frugal living earned by cultivating infertile and unproductive land, timber production and sheep and goat farming. This study provides a description of the operation of the sheep and goat farming system in the Muslim villages of Evros. According to the results of a questionnaire survey, farms are of small size and operate under a very extensive pattern, keeping traditional management practices, rearing autochthonous animal breeds fed upon the natural vegetation of mountainous rangelands almost throughout the year. Labor is offered exclusively by family members and women play a central role, as male members choose to work in timber production or to migrate. Farm households are highly self-sufficient, as a part of the raw products of the farm (milk, meat, wool) is manufactured and consumed by family members.

**Keywords.** Livestock production system – Pomaks – Female labor.

## **Le système d'élevage de la minorité musulmane au nord d'Evros, Grèce**

**Résumé.** La région grecque de Thrace est le principal centre de la minorité musulmane grecque. À part leur religion, ces personnes se distinguent par la langue, l'habillement et les coutumes. Dans la préfecture d'Evros, la minorité musulmane habite dans la partie nord-ouest et se compose principalement de Pomaks, une population qui a toujours vécu dans des villages isolés de montagne. Grâce à leurs interactions constantes avec l'environnement naturel, ils sont habitués à une vie frugale basée principalement sur l'élevage ovin et caprin, l'exploitation forestière et l'agriculture. Le but de cette étude est la description du fonctionnement du système d'élevage ovin et caprin dans les villages musulmans d'Evros. Selon les résultats d'une enquête par questionnaire, les exploitations sont de petite taille et fonctionnent sur un mode très extensif, en gardant des pratiques de gestion traditionnelles, en élevant des races d'animaux autochtones et en utilisant la végétation naturelle des parcours de montagne presque toute l'année. Le travail est fait exclusivement par les membres de la famille et les femmes jouent un rôle central, étant donné que les hommes s'orientent vers la production forestière ou l'émigration. Les ménages sont très autonomes et une partie de la production agricole familiale (lait, viande, laine) est transformée et consommée au sein du ménage.

**Mots-clés.** Système d'élevage – Pomaks – Travail des femmes

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## **I – Introduction**

The Greek Region of Thrace, comprising of the Prefectures of Xanthi, Rhodope and Evros, is the main center of the Greek Muslim minority, since the Lausanne Treaty in 1923. This is the only explicitly recognized minority of about 100,000 people in Greece - almost 1% of the total population. Pomaks constitute a significant part of this minority; in total there are 36,000 Pomaks in the Region, of whom almost 2,000 live in the Prefecture of Evros (ELSTAT, 2011). These people are characterized by their language, traditional attire, customs, way of living and

even their physical characteristics. Their language is classified as a dialect of the Bulgarian language and existed before the emergence of the modern nation-states (Ghodsee, 2010).

Pomaks have historically been a highland population who has always lived isolated in mountainous villages. These communities, being isolated in their territory, did not experience the transformations that occurred in the rural communities in the lowlands of Greece. As an imminent result, their rural economy is poorly diversified and employment opportunities are limited for those who do not decide to migrate. Local people are used to a simple way of life, mainly based on self-consumption and the primary sector provides them almost all the employment opportunities. Crop production in the area is restricted due to poor soil quality and low productivity; the main crop is tobacco of excellent quality, which is sold to manufacturers (Greek or international), but also many Pomaks are engaged in forestry.

The livestock production pattern in northern Evros is dual. In the lowlands, intensive farms prevail, which are actually striving for survival in an uncertain environment of financial stress (Koutsou *et al.*, 2013), due to their high dependence on capital. These farms have followed an expansion path common for the whole Greek primary sector, aiming at increasing size and competitiveness by simultaneously minimizing production costs (Karanikolas and Martinos, 2012). On the other hand, the mountainous areas inhabited by Pomaks are endowed with unexploited resources, including history, the sustainable utilization of the natural resources (land, forests and pastures) and technical skills in the manufacture of the agricultural products. Nowadays, livestock farming is the most important economic activity of Pomaks in Evros; they rear sheep and goats and, to a lesser extent, cattle, under a strictly family pattern which did not adopt many modern and/or innovative features. Tradition essentially outlines the resilience of the production system, which enables Pomak livestock farms to survive the economic crisis with minimum losses.

A key feature of the Pomak way of life is that women play a decisive role not only in the rural household, but also in the rural society. The wife is involved in farm operation, providing mainly manual labor; however, in many circumstances she takes the control of the farm. It is usual that the husband often migrates either outside or inside the country in search of work and usually he is employed as a sailor or worker, thus leaving the rural community for long periods. Simultaneously, women, apart from their daily involvement in the farm work, possess the know-how in the production of crop and livestock manufactured products.

This study provides a description of the operation of the sheep and goat farming system in the Muslim villages of Evros. Based on a questionnaire survey, the main dimensions of the operation of the system are presented. Particular attention is paid on the features that shape the resilience of the system. We discuss the possibilities of “good practices” transfer to other Greek production sectors and systems, as remedies against the economic crisis.

## **II – Materials and methods**

The data for the analysis were gathered through a questionnaire survey during the summer of 2011 in Northern Evros, which is situated in northeastern Greece, on the border with Bulgaria and Turkey. The sample included 41 farms and the interviews were all conducted with the wives by women enumerators, because it was easier to approach them and to get sincere and reliable responses. Interviewers were invited to the rural households.

## **III – Results and discussion**

Table 1 presents the profile of the human labor requirements in the Pomak farms. In all cases, labor is offered exclusively by family members. It is verified that Pomak women constitute a primary pillar in the operation of the farm. It can be seen that almost half of the total labor in the farm comes from female members while other family members (children, grandparents) play a

rather auxiliary role. Discussions with locals have revealed that in the past few years males worked even less in the farm; it was the crisis that compelled them to return to the rural community and undertake some duties.

**Table 1. Labour availability and requirements**

	Family labor	Husband labor	Wife labor	Other members	Wives' chores				
					Milking	Feeding	Cleaning	Grazing	Other
<b>Hours</b>	6230	2402	2865	964					
<b>h/eewe</b>	18.8	7.3	8.7	2.9					
<b>h/day</b>					3.2	1.7	1.7	0.4	0.8

Pomak women spend 7.8 hours per day on average working on the farm and performing all types of everyday manual tasks. Most of this labor concerns milking, followed by feeding and cleaning. This profile of labor is not compatible with the role of women in other types of farms; as Herron and Skinner (2012) point out, women's labor is endowed with particular emotional elements "... crucial for the sustainability of rural people and places". This means that women in other systems usually undertake more specific tasks – for instance during the birth season. It is also very interesting to notice that the vast majority of respondents revealed to take decisions for the farm commonly with their husbands (83%), and only a small part claimed not to be a part of the decision making process (10%).

The profile of the production system is depicted in Table 2. Farms are of small size and operate under a very extensive pattern, keeping traditional management practices, rearing autochthonous animal breeds and using the natural vegetation of mountainous rangelands almost throughout the year. Considering the former, most farms rear sheep and goats, with an average size of 247.6 and 287.2 animals respectively, while half of the farms keep a few cows mainly to cover their household needs in meat and milk. As for the latter, the survey revealed that almost all of the 41 farms applied grazing, but they also used purchased feedstuff. As the area is deprived of fertile land, it is unusual to produce feedstuff. The average farm cultivates only 0.9 ha of arid land with cereal and 1.2 ha for the production of forage (lucerne or cultivated grasslands), while almost half of the farms are not engaged in any crop production activity.

**Table 2. Farm profile, size and infrastructure of the average farm. Number of farms.**

	Crops		Animals			Others					
	Cereal (ha)	Cultivated grassland/ lucerne (ha)	Cattle (av. number)	Sheep (av. number)	Goats (av. number)	Applying grazing	Purchased feedstuff	Use of tractor	Own a farmers' car	Own milking machine	Own modern buildings
<b>Yes</b>	16 (0.9)	24 (1.2)	21 (10.6)	17 (247.6)	12 (287.2)	40	33	29	36	1	6
<b>No</b>	25	17	20	24	29	1	8	12	5	40	35

The results in Table 2 also ascertain that the Pomak production system is not dependent on capital. Tractors and farmers' cars are the only types of machinery available in 70% and 88% of the farms respectively. Only one farm rearing dairy cattle has invested on machine milking. Buildings are mostly of the traditional type, makeshift and of cheap materials; only 14% of respondents reported to have modernized their buildings in the past 10 years.

Table 3 illustrates the main products and their marketing. Milk is the most important product, produced in 39 farms. It can be seen that a considerable part of milk production is channeled to

markets through conventional supply chains, namely a local Cooperative (46%) and local dairies (12%). However, farm households are fairly self-sufficient, as more than one third of the milk remains in the farm, either for raw consumption or for manufacturing. Only three women do not produce cheese, while almost 60% also produce other dairy products (yoghurt and local “ariani”). Unlike raw milk, most of these products are consumed within the household, like all the manufactured meat products (local “kavourmas” and sausages). Despite the fact that some of these products are endowed with special characteristics, they are not appreciated by women themselves, as only three of them claimed otherwise.

**Table 3. Production, manufacturing and product sales (number of farms)**

	Milk	Home manufacturing		
		Cheese	Other dairy	Meat
Cooperative	19	0	0	0
Dairy industry	5	0	0	0
Local market	1	4	4	0
Home consumption	14	36	24	10
No production	2	3	17	31

## IV – Conclusions

The Pomak society is a closed one, as a result of its historical isolation. The data presented in this paper revealed that the elements of its resilience can be traced back to this fact: Pomaks only opened up to markets, hired labor and investments at a very low degree and under the economic crisis they safeguarded their family character and did not suffer intense repercussions. It can be supported, then, that the adoption of an extensive production pattern and the operation of farms away from markets constitutes a reliable alternative ensuring the temporal reproduction of farms. But then the question is raised: is the future of sheep-goat farming related to an “Extensive” lifestyle – even in isolation - which has been abandoned for decades? What about the entrepreneurial forms of livestock production which are being supported by agricultural policies in the EU?

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