



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Understanding Ethnic Identities in Bosnia

By Lisa Adeli, University of Arizona Center for Middle Eastern Studies

For more than 1600 years, Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter, referred to as Bosnia) has been a borderland between East and West: geographically, politically, religiously, and culturally. Located in the Balkans, southeastern Europe, Bosnia is a place where religions and civilizations meet. This intersection of cultures has sometimes made Bosnia a battleground of competing ideologies – and competing armies. “We have more history than we can stand,” a Bosnian journalist remarked, and indeed, Bosnia has often suffered greatly because of its geographical position and ethnic diversity. However, this same diversity means that the country has developed a very rich, multi-faceted culture expressed in the area’s diverse architecture, music, literature, and foodways.

While in the US, race is often used as the marker of ethnic identity, that’s not really true in Bosnia, where you can’t tell people’s “ethnicity” (or “nationality”) by their skin color or physical appearance. Instead, it is religion that determines people’s “nationality” – not where they live or what they look like. Here’s what that means:

- Bosnian Catholics are called Croats even if they had never visited Croatia or set foot in a Catholic Church. Croats make up about 15% of Bosnia’s population.
- Orthodox Christians are called Serbs even if they have never been to Serbia or belonged to an Orthodox congregation. Serbs make up about 31% of Bosnia’s population.
- Muslims – about 51% – are considered Muslim in ‘nationality’ as well as religion (though today they are called ‘Bosniaks’ because Westerners got too confused by all of this during the 1990s war). Again, it doesn’t matter whether or not they actually practice Islam.
- The Jewish minority, now very small in numbers but not in importance, is considered Jewish in ‘nationality.’

Everything is more confusing since the people all look the same and may live in the same towns/areas. (Westerners are sometimes surprised to see so many blonde Muslims in Bosnia, leading Bosnians to comment, “Islam is not a hair color, but a religion!”) Ethnic identity is NOT listed on people’s passports or identity cards.

So how do Bosnians themselves know who is who? It’s sometimes all in the name: their first name or last name often reflects their cultural heritage. (For example, someone named Fatima or Amir is obviously Muslim, while someone named Marija or Ivan is of Christian

origin.) To make matters more confusing, people very often intermarry, and the children from these marriages are ethnically mixed.

Language is another factor that sometimes divides Bosnians. On the one hand, Bosnians are Slavs, who all speak a dialect of a South Slavic language (today often referred to in the US as BCS, for Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian). However, due to their complicated history, Bosnians write the language in two different alphabets. Serbs prefer the Cyrillic alphabet (related to but different from the Russian alphabet), while the other groups prefer the Latin alphabet (related to but a bit different from our English writing system). Road signs on major highways are in both alphabets, but if you travel through an area inhabited mainly by Bosnian Croats, you'll often see the Cyrillic writing vandalized; if you travel through an area inhabited by Bosnian Serbs, you'll see the Latin letters vandalized!

Bosnia's diversity is at once the source of great tragedy and great strength. During World War II and the Holocaust and, more recently, during the 1990s war, Bosnia has been the scene of ethnic persecution and horror. Yet, aside from those terrible times, Bosnia is an area rich in culture and traditions, fabulously beautiful and interesting, with people who are resilient and full of humor.