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A CRITICAL VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ROMOLOGY: EMPLOYING THE EVANGELICAL SOURCES

Introduction

The issue of Evangelical conversion of Gypsy and ‘Gypsy-like’ communities worldwide has attracted the attention of a large circle of scholars. Scholars of certain methodological schools, such as ethnologists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, sociologists, or linguists study the process of dissemination of the so-called *New Churches* among Roma people and its impact on Roma culture and way of life. Such an interdisciplinary approach embraces the achievements of a set of academic disciplines and thus contributes for the development of contemporary Romology. The most important problem discussed in the literature is related to the question whether conversion to Evangelism influences only positively the cultural and social life of Roma people, supporting their successful integration into society as consequence, or does Evangelism lead to a kind of unification of the culture of different Roma groups in one common *Evangelical culture*, which in turn results in the loss of part of the identity of the communities?

In this article I will propose a critical view on one source of significant importance for the study of the process of Evangelical conversion, namely religious music. The most important tendencies characterizing the Evangelical culture of Bulgarian Roma can be retraced by analyzing this source. Since Bulgaria is part of the common wave for evangelizing the Roma in the name of Jesus Christ, the conclusions could be valid for a wider geographical area that goes beyond the boundaries of Bulgaria. Religious music is an instrument by which the people’s hearts can be reached in the fastest possible way and thus, besides a method of successful missionary work, it is an indicator for important changes.

Classification and Typology of the Evangelical Sources

Various sources should be taken into account when studying the issue of evangelization among Roma and the complete dimensions of the changes that

have occurred within the communities. These sources are generally defined as Protestant because of their origin. They are specific sources that include concrete information about the problematic that we are interested in. An essential part of the protestant sources are the ones published and disseminated in Romany language (*Romanes*). The sources can be classified as following: literary, internet, music sources and fieldwork data. The last ones are gained during fieldwork. In accordance with the methods of the Bulgarian Ethnology, qualitative methods are usually applied during fieldwork studies among the researched community. In traditional Ethnography most often an encircling survey in a definite settlement (or region) is done, so that the ethnographer could submerge entirely among the studied community. The term of sojourn is not more than a month, as in a certain period afterwards the fieldworker returns to the 'field' again in order to trace back the possible changes in the group's lifestyle. In this way the process of studying might continue up to several years. At present, other methods are applied in the field of Ethnography and some of them are also employed in Romology. These are the methods of case study and, rather rarely, the method of reflective anthropology. The fieldwork methods, on the other hand, include participant observation, free interviews (free conversations with informants guided by the investigator to the topics of interest for the research) and life-story interviews. Structured interviews, brief linguistic questionnaires or sociological inquiries are rarely used. From the technical methods, this of visual anthropology is used as well.

Evangelical sources can be classified in some other categories, depending on their nature and function: religious periodic; translated literature; author literature, unpublished manuscripts of Roma pastors or other servants; internet sources (protestant websites information or information gained by personal on-line correspondence), and music sources.

Important in the process of studying the evangelization among Gypsies is the collection of different religious periodicals, such as newspapers and journals, which are official publications of the protestant congregations in Bulgaria and abroad. Part of them are published also in Romanes for the needs of protestant missionaries among Roma people. The first attempts at issuing newspapers for the Gypsies dates back to the 1920s and the 1930s. For instance, the monthly newspaper *Svetilnik* (Enlightener) was published in 1927 with special addendum in Romanes – *Romano alav* (A Roma talk), another newspaper – *News of the Gypsy Evangelical Mission* was first published in 1933.

An important source for such type of study is the religious literature translated into Romany. With the support of the Bible Societies in Great Britain, the U.S. and other countries, the Bible and the New Testament are constantly being

translated into different dialects of Romanes. George Borrow was one of the first who translated the Bible into the Gypsy language as a missionary of the Bible Society in London (1836). It is also worth pointing out that Borrow published several articles about the Gypsies on the Iberian Peninsula, which influenced the development of research work dedicated to this ethnic community (1841; 1857). Other popular versions are translations of the Bible and separate books of the Holy Scripture in Kelderara dialect, made by the writer of Roma origin Mateo Maximoff, with the contribution of the International Bible Society in London and the Bible Societies of Sweden and France (1970; 1981-1984; 1990-1995 etc.). Also worth mentioning is the first translation of the Gospel of Luke in the Erlii dialect made by Bernard Gilliat-Smith, used in Bulgaria for the needs of the Bible Society in London (1912). One of the last translations of the New Testament made in Bulgaria is that of Mr. Sulyo Metkov, in the Erlii dialect.

In this context I should point out some basic monographic books of the world known evangelical missionaries, in which they present their missionary activities among Gypsies. Such is the book by Joe Ridholls, a Methodist minister – *Travelling Home. God's Work of Revival among Gypsy Folk* (1986). In India the monographic work of an apostolic missionary for Gypsy Pentecostalism, pastor Clément Le Cossec, was released under the title *My Adventures with the Gypsies* (1991). Many books about one of the most famous worldwide Roma missionary, Gypsy Smith, were published and reprinted, describing his life and activity as preacher. For instance, such is the book by David Lazell (1997) – *Gypsy from the Forest. A New Biography of the International Evangelist Gypsy Smith (1860-1947)*.

During the years also a whole cycle of religious literature was published in Romany: *Duware bijanipe* (1933) [Double birth]; *O Del vakjarda* (1933) [God said]; *O drom uhtavdo* (1938) [The way upwards]. Important and very useful sources in this type of study are the archive histories of the churches, written by the spiritual leaders as well as the M.A. theses, written by Evangelical Roma, and successfully defended at different prestigious Higher Protestant Institutes.

Particularly and significant source in this type of study of religious problems are the internet websites, where Protestant or Roma specific issues are presented. Here I should also include my personal data, obtained via internet and as a result of on-line conversations with informants.

Music sources are among the most interesting and useful for the development of this scholarly trend in Romology because they contain rich and diverse information. We should take into account various songs with religious content (Gospel songs) under the term *music sources*. Many of these songs are officially

published in collections called songbook, being released as music products on the market in cassette, CD, and DVD format or in mp3 format in internet as well. Many collections of Gospel songs have been published by different Protestant congregations during the years. Considerable parts of them were issued in Romanes. For example, I can point out ones of the first books published with translations of evangelistic hymns in Romanes –*Romane svjato gili* [Roma sacred song] (1929); *Romane somnal gilja* [Roma sacred songs] (1936).

During fieldwork the ethnographer can often find local folklore Gospel songs that do not have an official character. They are written down in notebooks or diaries with Cyrillic alphabet no matter what is the language, Bulgarian, Turkish, Romanian or Romany. The songs are kept in the local churches. These hymns have contents similar to the texts of all other Gospel songs, but thanks to their unofficial character, the typical linguistic peculiarities of various Roma dialects are clearly distinguishable in them.

A brief presentation of Bulgarian Roma

The heterogeneous community of the Bulgarian Roma leads a diverse way of life. Orthodox Gypsies are called traditionally *Dasikane roma* (Bulgarian Gypsies, i.e. Christians). Orthodox by a tradition are also *Rudari* (the community has two main subdivisions – *Lingurari* [spoon-makers], who are wood carvers, and *Ursari* [bear-trainers]); *Asparuhovi bălgari* (Asparukh Bulgarians, their name is derived from the name of the old Bulgarian Khan Asparukh, whom they consider to be their “king”); *Burgudžii* (gimletmakers); *Kaldaraši/Kardaraši* (their most often self-appellation is *Rrom Ciganjaka* in sense of true Gypsies), *Vlaxički tsigani* [called also as *Rešetari*, i.e. sieve makers], etc.; and Muslims – *Millet* (i.e. people), Gypsies with a preferred Turkish identity *Xoraxane roma* (Turkish Gypsies, i.e. Muslims), *Muzikanti* (musicians), etc. The process of Evangelization is widespread among almost all Roma groups in Bulgaria: among both Orthodox Gypsies and Muslims, as among the various groups the extent of dissemination is different. In most cases the same group could unite Orthodox Christians and Evangelists or Muslims and Evangelists, which does not ruin their community way of life and does not lead to conflicts between them on this basis. Some of the Gypsies speak Romanes (*Burgudžii*, *Kaldaraši*, *Muzikanti*, *Vlaxički tsigani* etc.), while for others the mother tongue is Romanian (*Rudari*), Turkish (*Millet*, Gypsies with a preferred Turkish identity) or Bulgarian (*Asparuhovi bălgari*).

The Evangelical Music

Nowadays the New Churches known in Bulgaria generally as Evangelical (Protestant) have significant place and role for both the community life of Roma

and their inter-group social organization. The beginning of the 20th century was characterized by successful Evangelical missions in the regions of Lom (North-western Bulgaria) and the capital Sofia. The first successful mission of Protestant missionaries among Gypsies was implemented in the village of Golintsi (today’s neighbourhood ‘Mladenovo’ in the town of Lom), where a Baptist church was established with the active support of Austrian missionaries.

Evangelists are a heterogeneous community. It comprises Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists (Sabbatarians), Jehovah’s Witnesses etc., who belong to various congregations and attend religious services in separate churches. Some of the new Christians have repented for many years, others for generations before, while others are new adepts. The endonyms used by the new Christians after baptism are different, but similar by sense, such as *asbelievers* (or *believers in Jesus Christ*), *repentant*, *Christians* (or *new Christians*), or the appellations derived from the type of church they visit for services *Pentecostals* etc.). The Roma Church models in different ways the lifestyle of all the members through religious rules and norms. The new ideology influences the most important categories of beliefs, perceptions of the world and mentality of Roma people. One of the most significant changes in the way of life is the new attitude of the Christians toward the secular (‘worldly’) music. The churches, led by the pastors, are trying to change the material and spiritual cultures of the converts, and to impose the idea that the Evangelists must dedicate themselves in service of God. They must mainly listen to (and also to like) religious Protestant music and should not dance the ‘worldly’ dances. The refusal to listen to secular music and to dance ‘traditional’ dances (belly dances and traditional *khoro* [ring dance]) is a manner to demonstrate belonging to the Church and ‘being true, good Gypsies’. However, it reveals the ambition to distinguish themselves from Non-Evangelists (no matter Bulgarians or Gypsies).

The music culture is a way and strategy for cultural expression through which the Roma/Gypsy identity of individuals or group belonging can be manifested, and attention to them can be well directed. The archetype of the Gypsy musician as entertainer of the majority is several hundred years old. Gypsy music is the only element of Roma culture that was earlier accepted in a patronizing way. The music is the cultural sphere, in which the Roma feel comfortable without feeling a necessity to ‘hide’ their real ethnic origin, no matter how they are perceived by the macro-society – as romantic heroes who need special attention only because they are ‘Gypsies’ or as professionals who determine the tendencies in contemporary music. On the contrary, the Gypsy/Roma origin is often demonstrated in music because it is a way to gain social prestige that is hard to be

reached in other spheres, as the society in which Roma live continues to be stereotypically disposed. So the stigma of being considered Gypsies, but in the negative sense, is removed. In return, their singing in Romany is now accepted, ensuring a positive ethnic performance.

Protestant music is very different as a style due to the messages transmitted in it and it should not to be comparable with the popular music in Bulgaria. Of course, this music has its audience as well, but exclusively among converts. Gospel hymns are known as songs for praise and worship because of their purposes. Roma hymns are very popular in these groups and except as songs for a mood, they have clear spiritual messages, which have to reach the Roma's consciousness. The Evangelical songs in Romanes are often called *Devlikane gilja* (i.e. God's songs). They belong to a specific genre, on which Evangelical hymns are created or translated in Romany and in this way penetrate in their midst, where they start to develop into new folklore forms.

Religious singers of Roma origin have a good reputation and enjoy great prestige in their community that is comparable to the authority of the pastors. Those among them who are more ambitious often have a successful career in music, and expect that they are participants at the church chorus and do their everyday activities. Most of them are natural talents, but there are also experienced musicians who have changed their profession with the position of musicians who after baptism play God's songs only. In 2006, during my fieldwork in Spain, I met a Gitano musician who was a peddler and at the same time played the guitar during services in the local Evangelical church. He was a professional musician of rumba prior to his conversion. Other examples of pastors who practice an extra job (i.e. 'worldly' job) as musicians might also be seen in the 'field'.

The creation and performance of Gospel music, written to express either personal or a communal belief regarding Christian life, has a great significance as a method of evangelization, apart from the publication and dissemination of religious literature in a language accessible to the people. The missionary network of Protestant congregations is organized quite efficiently, which in turn contributes to the successful dissemination of religious music both among converts and non-converts. The main aim of the Gospel hymns is to reach the people in the fastest way possible, so they can discover the strength of God's love. Gospel music is composed and performed for purposes connected with presenting of the right way to behave and think after the individual's 'rebirth' in the name of Jesus Christ. However, a common theme of most of the Gospel music is the expression of praise, worship or thanks to God.

Music is an integral part of the regular weekly services. Singing during the services is accompanied either by specific dances (i.e. a kind of bounces, with

which the believers express both the joy of the Holy Spirit's 'presence' and their participation in the common gaiety) or mutual singing without stirring by all who are present. The way of music performance depends on the church's subdivision (traditional or charismatic [neo-Protestant]). While dancing, the dancers keep decency in any case. In a number of Protestant churches there is a chorus, as the musicians sing the religious hymns during the services. These are the so-called groups for praise and worship, which have different names, depending on the church's subdivision, for example – Team for praise *Life in Glory*, a Group for praise to the *Church of Love, Philadelphia* etc.

In Roma churches evangelical hymns are sang in Romany, Bulgarian, Turkish or Romanian. The songs are composed in pop style. In most houses of prayer there are songbooks, called by the believers *pesnarki*. This style of singing of God's songs in Romanes is known among these communities as *Roma khvalenie* [A Roma praise].

In small houses of prayer and in domestic religious groups there is no chorus, but very often there is someone who 'writes the songs' or chooses the song repertoire for the services. Believers do not use the phrase 'writing the songs', because, according to them, this is blasphemy. They believe that the creation of texts for the evangelical songs is not just writing, but that someone of the Christians (no matter who) has received the text in the conversation with God or has dream it. After that the text is written down in notebooks, kept in the church or in the house of the 'song's author'. Roma churches possess different musical instruments; most of them are modern and were not known in traditional Gypsy music – tambourines, mandolins, drums, accordions, synthesizers, guitars, pianos. Some of the churches have their own business of producing and releasing (in different format) God's hymns in Romanes, Bulgarian or Turkish on the marketplace. The albums are composed by the groups of praise. Some of the churches in the capital Sofia and part of the country's houses of prayer are engaged with this business. During the years some of the religious music groups, the members of which are mainly Roma, have enjoyed great popularity – *Eloi, Elinai, VIG Golgota, Prodiv, El Shadai* etc. Some of the singers from the teams of praise became popular as musicians and good missionaries – *Metodi, Jašarka, Ali (Ilya Panov)* etc. The well known on the Balkans, Bulgarian pop-folk musician of Roma origin *Azis* (Vasil Boyanov) started his career as a singer of evangelical songs together with his mother as members of *Molitva* group. Roma hymns by various evangelical music groups are available on internet: <http://www.bgbible.com/> www.hvalenie.com etc. During evangelizations among Roma people in Bulgaria or abroad an integral part of these activities is the music performance, presented by the groups of

praise and worship. Evangelical singers are often invited as guests at different festivals of secular character, for example the celebration of International Roma Day (8th April).

Remarks on some problematic issues

According to the opinion of some researchers, religious songs should be considered as a new style in Roma music called *Rom-pop*. These hymns have similar pop sound and texts. The texts are concerned with the questions about the life and the cause of Jesus Christ, various biblical themes, the theme of sin and sinfulness, and recommendations for the new Christians' behavior, their everyday and religious life – *Baro si o Del* [God is great], *O Isus man obichil* [Jesus loves me] *Sikav man, Devla* [Teach me, my God] *Te mangâla ko pocoi* [If your heart wants] etc. The hymns in Romany have a universal character (style and language), as their main aim is to reach more people. On one hand, this explains their large popularity, but on the other hand, a new phenomenon appears. So the Gypsy language used at the church services is changed. A lot of Bulgarian words enter the songs to indicate new concepts with religious character. Usually, words to name the evangelical notions do not exist in Roma dialects. Words, from the language of the country where the Gypsies live, are borrowed to indicate these ideas. In our case the Bulgarian words name a key for the believers' appellations like – *Bibliya* (Bible), *Sveti dukh* (Holy Spirit), *pastor*, *gryakh* (sin), *lyubov* (love), *slavya* (glorify), *uteshavam* (to console) etc. Part of the used words remains with terminations in Romanes: *slavin-av*, *te promenin-es*, *grehov-enge* etc. In some dialects there are words about the priest (for example *rašai*), but these words are connected with the Orthodox religion and are not used to indicate the protestant minister. The Evangelists have a similar way of expressing. They do not curse, especially in public places. After the conversion Christians change their language of expression, they do not use obscene words and often talk about God and Jesus Christ. Even Roma communities with relatively preserved group's dialect also use Bulgarian words in the hymns to indicate the new evangelical notions, but in their songs these words are rarely seen. In particular God's songs the character dialect peculiarities of the Roma group can be observed.

Conclusion

Under the influence of Evangelism and its wide dissemination among the Roma, tendencies that signify formation of a new Roma community have appeared. Consequently, under the influence of Evangelism we see the emergence of a *new Roma culture*. Distancing themselves from traditional religion, repre-

sentatives of various Gypsy groups accept a different faith and a new way of life. The community of the Gypsy Evangelists imagine itself as a 'new' community, mainly due to the form of Protestantism adopted. As such, it is expressed in their daily life and festivals. As a result of these processes some of the Roma gradually integrate into the Roma Evangelical community, while others stick to their own distinctiveness. The question is whether the unification of the culture of the Evangelists (particularly in regard to the style and language of God's songs) leads to important (and visible) changes in Romanes? Is the integration of the Roma into the Protestant congregations accompanied by the opposite effect – changes in their way of life and culture, and therefore, loss of part of the communities' identity or their specifics? This is one of the issues discussed in contemporary Romology.

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