



UNIVERSITY OF NIŠ
The scientific journal FACTA UNIVERSITATIS
Series: **Philosophy and Sociology** Vol.2, N° 6, 1999 pp. 81 - 89
Editor of series: *Glgorije Zaječaranović*
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THE RELATIONS OF ETHNIC AND CONFESSIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF GYPSIES IN BULGARIA

UDC:316.35:116.4

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Bulgaria

Abstract. *In general, Bulgarian Gypsies are Eastern Orthodox Christians and Moslems — the two mainstream religions in Bulgaria. Today a heavy influence is exercised by the different Protestant denominations (often considered "sects" in Bulgaria), and certain evangelical churches recruiting among the Gypsies.*

The proposed paper will look at the Relations of Ethnic and Confessional Consciousness of Gypsies in Bulgaria. Under the influence of the practised religion and the manifestations of preferred ethnic self-consciousness traditional hierarchy of Gypsies in Bulgaria, is changed, groups are rearranged. A change of religion or the conversion to a new religion is often seen as a possibility to seek a new place in the overall structure of the surrounding society, to adjust to new conditions, to find an outlet from the crisis in one's own ethnic body; under Balkan conditions (where ethnic and religious identity often are confused) this could be also a way to change one's own ethnic attribution.

This trend indicates moreover the existence of an attempted modification in the group mechanism of social life through substitution with new patterns and rapprochement to the dominant standards of the macro-society. In any case, religion continues till today to perform its function of integrating and segregating, i.e. it is instrumental in the integration of the Gypsy groups into the Roma meta-group communities and sets them apart from other subdivisions of the Gypsy people.

Many of those who have studied Gypsies from the time of their first encounters with Europeans until today, have noted their attitude to change their religion easily and swiftly or to combine in a syncretic way the elements of different religions and older "pagan" beliefs. Hence, the often made conclusions about the absence of religion among the Gypsies in general, like: "The Gypsies do not belong to any religion... They subscribe to

Received September 10, 1997

Christianity in Christian countries, they are Muslims in Turkey and if there were a kingdom of Juda, they would be Jews there." [1] or: "Gypsies had no religion of their own...they change their religion according the country in which they live... They are baptized in Christian countries, and circumcized if they live among Muslims. They are Greek (i.e. Orthodox) in Greece, Catholic among Catholics, and if they live among Protestants they recognise the Protestant faith." [2]

This contemptuous attitude toward the Gypsies as a non-religious community (or with bizarre religiosity) is reflected in the oral folk tradition of the surrounding population. For example, there is a parable, widespread through the Balkans, narrating that the Gypsies built a church of their own from lard (in another version from cheese) but when they got hungry they ate it and for this reason today they have "neither church, nor religion", [3] and a proverb that "There are 77 and a half faiths on the earth, and the half-faith belongs to the Gypsies". [4] We can add the well known anecdote, published in the Dictionary of Vuk Karadžić: "Once a Gypsy was asked to what faith he belonged, and he answered: "The one that pleases you, sir".

A similar lack of understanding of Gypsy religion and religiosity can be observed among many modern statistical and sociological researchers, as well as in the People's Census questionnaire that tries to establish the number of Christian Gypsies and Muslim Gypsies. [5] In these cases, the researchers are really puzzled by the fact that considerable parts of the Gypsy community in Bulgaria are unable to provide a clear and explicit answer to questions about the religion they practice or their responses contain several contradicting statements (for example, Gypsies declaring themselves Muslims name as their biggest festivals the Christian holidays). [6]

These perceptions of Gypsies as people with a "weird religion" bespeak a virtual failure to understand the very essence of the phenomenon religion and its multilateral dimensions and manifestations, together with the prejudgment and criticism of an "alien" ethnic community and "alien" religion solely on the basis of the dominant criteria and norms of one's own culture (in our case, from the view point of the Christian monotheism of Bulgarians).

Attempts to explain the *Gypsy religion* as a mysterious ancient ancestral inheritance have not been very successful, either because evidence and proof are most often lacking or because the available ones are quite unsatisfactory. [7] It would be more adequate to look for a specific selective adaptation of general ideas or different elements belonging to the religion of the surrounding population, and their integration into the system of their own principle world perceptions. This process is quite diverse and may assume different forms but its very essence is preset by the specificity of the Gypsies as an ethnic community, by their origin and the vicissitude of their historical destiny. The specific kind of perception regarding religious life brought by the Gypsies from their motherland (Ancient India) is correlated to the complex social structure of the community and the concrete historical conditions, i.e. the religion in its form and functions differs considerably among the separate subdivisions of the Gypsy communities in Bulgaria.

In general, Bulgarian Gypsies are Eastern Orthodox Christians or Muslims - the two mainstream religions in Bulgaria. Cases of other Christian denominations (mainly Catholicism) are relatively rare. Today a heavy influence is exercised by the different Protestant denominations (often considered "sects" in Bulgaria), and certain evangelical churches recruiting among the Gypsies.

The subdivisions of the conventionally called "Kardaraši" [8] are traditionally and emphatically Orthodox Christians. Religion is conceived by them as one of the most important and stressed characteristics of the community ("We are from the Christian Gypsies", "according to pure ethnicity, we are Orthodox Christians"), and serves to a great extent as a delimitation from other Gypsy communities. The situation is identical with other big subdivision, the *Rudari*, where religion also functions as a distinctive feature, separating them from other Gypsies, although they do not appear to be very religious. Both big divisions were Christians back when they were living in Wallachia and Moldavia and there is no evidence of any change of religion among them, nor any elements of religious syncretism in the systems of festivals and rites, which follow the Bulgarian Christian Orthodox calendar.

Although affirmed Christians, the notions of the principal tenets and beliefs in both communities is very vague. In general, they acknowledge the existence of God (O'Devel) and the Devil (O'Beng) as symbols of good and evil, but their notions of heaven and an after-life differ significantly from the Christian norms (for example: "I believe in God, why not I, but I am a fortuneteller and there is nothing after death, who dies is gone"). Reward and punishment exist only in the present world, in this life, on this earth, Heaven and Hell being something abstract. This is why religious practices connected with the fulfilment of concrete wishes and the meeting of obligations are very popular, viz. the lighting of candles in the church, vows of fasting or of offering a sacrifice (usually a ram or a sheep) for a specific purpose, ceremonial visits to monasteries and other holy places on certain holidays, such as the traditional visits of the "Thracean" *Kalajdzii* to the Bachkovo monastery on its patron's day, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Most often this is motivated by a vow or hope for fulfilment of certain desires and everyone brings and donates to the monastery whatever they have promised: a lamb, pigeons, some fabric. Among the *Zlatari* and the *Lajaši* especially prestigious are the visits to the Rila monastery for baptism of children. Among all Gypsies is a very strong belief in different good or bad omens, signalled by certain animals, birds, dreams and everyday events, or in misfortunes caused by neglecting the rules of behaviour - for example, trespassing over a ritual sermon will bring the spelled disasters; hurting a swallow, which "Thracean" *Kalajdzii* believe to be a bird that can spell a curse, can bring disaster (like paralysis of arms); etc.

Rather different, more diverse and complicated is the situation in the large community of the so-called "Jerlii". Two big subdivisions exist within the "Jerlii" community, distinguished by their religion, the *Xoraxane Roma* (Muslims, "Turkish Gypsies") and *Dassikane Roma* (Christians, "Bulgarian Gypsies"). The situation among the *Dassikane Roma* resembles that of the "Kardaraši" and *Rudari*, especially among the well preserved groups (like the *Burgudzii-Parpulii* in Northeastern Bulgaria), where adherence to Eastern Orthodox Christianity is an important distinctive feature, always stressed by the group. Even more interesting is the Plovdiv example where the local *Burgudzii* used to have Muslim names and probably followed Islam three to four generations ago. They moved to the *Stolipinovo mahala*, where the Gypsies spoke Turkish and had a preferred Turkish selfconsciousness. This made them search for a religious differentiation – they became Christians and still refuse to accept the fact that their forefathers had been Muslims.

The bigger part of this community of "Bulgarian Gypsies", including those with preferred Bulgarian ethnic selfconsciousness, generally adopt the religious consciousness

and behaviour of the surrounding Bulgarian population while continuing the *earthy* orientation of their Gypsy religion (belief in omens and corresponding vows, sacrifices) characteristic of all Gypsies.

As an illustration of the specific religious world view and the specific functions of religion for the Gypsy community we can cite the explanation of Sofia "Erlii" to their lighting of candles at the Muslim cemetery:

"We light candles for health, a Gypsy never lights candles for the dead, only for the living. When the granddaughter of an old woman saw candles at the cemetery and asked to light one, her grandmother said: Leave them, only Bulgarians do this.

Among the "Jerlii" (both Christians and Muslims) very popular are the vows for healing, having a child etc. and the corresponding *kurbans* (sacrifices) - of rams, lambs, hens, roosters, the distribution and eating of the cooked meat of the sacrificed animal, while donations to churches and monasteries are not so frequent. The belief in different sorts of omens is very strong and it marks one's entire life, demanding constant attention not to miss certain signs. One is always on the alert for new forms and kinds of omens which shape destiny and everyday life-for example, relatively recent are the beliefs that washing the bride's gown, even years after the wedding, will bring trouble in the family, putting the purse on the floor will cause shortage of money in the household, etc.

Significant parts of the "Jerlii", however, are committed more or less to Islam. Far larger groups of Gypsies, however, have developed a special kind of *everyday Islam*. In many urban or village neighbourhoods Muslim Gypsies have their own priests - *Imams*, *Hodzha-s*, even *Hodzhakini* (the wife of the Hodzha, who assumes part of his functions and replaces him after his death), usually with no special religious training and in most cases with no official status, but acknowledged as such by the community. The religious syncretism among these Gypsies (some had preserved their groups, others had effaced the boundaries or are in the process of integrating a few groups into one) is clearly expressed and a tolerance between Islam and Christianity is marked: for example, a frequently heard statement is: "God is one, only his names are different in different languages - *Allah* in Turkish, *Bog* (God) in Bulgarian, *Devla* in Romanes, but the name doesn't matter, the important thing is faith".

This religious syncretism is even more pronounced in everyday life and rites. Even among the so called "Gypsies who tend to identify with the Turks" (where the influence of Islam is extremely strong) it is fairly common to see wall-hangings depicting Islamic Holy scenes alongside that of coloured prints with Christian themes (the Holy Virgin, angels, etc.). The practice of celebrating Christian holidays is widespread among Muslim Gypsies, as well as the performance of certain Christian rituals (like the lighting of candles on certain occasions), though there are some limitations. "We celebrate the Christian holidays, we may light a candle, but we don't cross ourselves". This exception, however, does not exist in most cases and Muslim-Gypsies accept as something perfectly normal and even necessary this mix of Islam and Christianity (for example, after visiting graves in Sheker Byram one should go to a church and light a candle for the sake of the children's health). This attitude is shared by the Gypsy priests, too, as one Imam (Islamic priest) of Chirpan put it: "We are God-fearing and obedient people and that's why we celebrate all the holidays. I am an Imam, but I celebrate the day of St. Basil, and the day of St. George, and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and Easter, When they come to me I baptize their children, and when boys come of age, I circumcise them. I do what is

waanted".

It is worth noting that the Gypsies of the analysed subdivision do not make any clear distinction between the different versions of the main religious denominations (between Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between Sunism and Shiism). Thus, the Gypsies with preferred Turkish self-consciousness in the region of Plovdiv define themselves as Catholics in their religion ("We are Turks, but after our religion we are Catholics...we get buried by a Xodzha, and our biggest holiday is "Catholic" Easter"). The *Erlii* from Sofia customarily go on a pilgrimage to the suburb of Knyazhevo, on the day of St. Elias (*Ilinden*) to pay homage to the Shrine of *Bali efendi* (also called by them Ali Baba) and always light a candle on the very tomb and in the nearby church of *Sveti Ilija* (St. Elias); the Gypsy Muslims from Vidin celebrate this day as *Ali gyun* (the day of Ali), the patron's day of everyone who bears this name.

Especially well defined are these processes of syncretism in the world perception and the rites among those of the "Jerlii", who more than once and for different reasons have changed their principal religious belief. It is not rare, especially in Western Bulgaria (as with the *Erlii* in Sofia) to find it virtually impossible to get an answer to the question of what denomination they belong to and when this question is asked different answers are given even within a single family, and to a Bulgarian this syncretism appears bizarre. As an example, a child born into a family is baptised by a Christian priest, while the grandfather is buried by a Moslem *xodzha*. Often the funeral ritual contradicts basic Islam rules, as the informants say "we are not so poor to bury our deceased without clothes, to bury him without a coffin, we do everything like other people do". These instances however, may not mean a lack of "genuine religion", but simply a different kind of religious perception such as is common in many regions of South and Southeastern Asia.

The situation observed among the Gypsies with a preferred ethnic consciousness [9] is more specific. The so called "Gypsies who tend to identify with the Turks" (i.e. the Gypsies, who speak Turkish and prefer to identify themselves as "Turks" or simply as "people" - "Milliet") are known for their strict observance of Islamic norms and ritual behaviour, their aspiration to assimilate with Bulgarian Turks in their religious life (attendance in the mosque, participation in courses to study the Qur'an, etc.), though the Turkish community is far from inclined to acknowledge the Gypsies as part of it. Some of them are conscious of their Gypsy origin, but in no case would like to express Gypsy identity. Some of them however display a clearly Turkish ethnic consciousness, Turkish being the mother tongue for most of them, since they do not speak (or speak very poorly) *Romanes*. The circumstance that the preferred ethnic community (the Bulgarian Turks) is not inclined to accept these persons as equals brings a sense of incompleteness to this ethnotransformational process. However, this does not alter the character of the process. We must emphasize here that this tendency to identify with the Turks (much abused lately by certain political forces in Bulgaria) is an absolutely natural process in this ethnic community that started many decades ago and is by no means induced by purposeful manipulation of external forces or political movements.

The explanation of this phenomenon can be found in two factors. First, it concerns Gypsies who have not retained their former group characteristics (including the primordial place of the group consciousness in the overall structure of ethnic consciousness). They appear to be amalgamated in the meta-group community which cannot fully assume the characteristics and functions of the former group, including the

realm of consciousness. As they try to establish their ethnic identity and are unable to find it within the boundaries of the meta-group community, they are compelled to adopt the ethnic parameters of the macro-society. Why they turn to a preferred identification with the main national minority (in this case the Turks) and not with the dominant nationality is understandable, when we consider the second main factor, which is the attitude of the macro-society and its prejudice toward the Gypsies, who are consistently rejected both administratively and personally. Confronted with this attitude from the macro-society, and having lost their former ethnic identity and desperately seeking adequate social recognition in the ethnic context, part of the Gypsies find their new ethnic identity with the Turks, a minority themselves but with ethnic identity recognized by the macrosociety. Turks are accepted by the macro-society as a community on a par with Bulgarians, a condition Gypsies have been denied. This second factor is the main reason for the Turkish identity of Gypsies in addition to a common religion, similar belief system, festivals and rituals and the same village lifestyle, etc, which are also contributing factors.

In general, cases of preferred Turkish ethnic identity prevail in Eastern Bulgaria, in regions with a significant Turkish population, but can be found in other places as well. They can occur in two different villages or even in two different sections of the same Gypsy neighbourhood where two groups of "Turkish Gypsies" are living, one with a preference for Turkish identity, the other not. More important is the fact that this preferred ethnic identity is observable only as a group pattern - among the members of remaining structures of former Gypsy groups or, more often, within the boundaries of a given village, settlement or region. Due to the complicated contamination of religious and ethnic consciousness in the Balkans this change of ethnic identity goes through a long way of intermediate "religious dimensions" (from here also the ethnonyms "Moslems" or "milliet").

The circumstance that Bulgarian Turks are not at all disposed to accept such Gypsy groups as part of their own ethnic community gives us the possibility to conclude that these cases represent an ongoing and incomplete ethnic process of transformation which may continue for decades. This incompleteness of the process, as well as its religious dimensions, does not change its ethno-transformational character.

Various Evangelical churches and sects have recently been exerting a strong influence on the "Jerlii" community. These activities are not totally new in Bulgaria. Between the World Wars, the British Bible Society commissioned the translation of part of the New Testament into Romanes [10] and the first evangelical churches were built in Gypsy neighbourhoods (e.g. Baptist gypsy mission in Lom, in the 1920's, publication of the first Gypsy newspaper in Bulgaria). [11]

During the years of "building socialism", the activity of these evangelical churches was greatly restricted, sometimes illegally so, but never stopped to exist at all. For example, a minister from the Pentecostal church told us: "More than 90% of our believers are Gypsies. We have been in Yambol since 1931, no one who has joined the church has left it, and right now, many many people are joining".

After the sweeping changes of November 10, 1989, the already established churches in Bulgaria (the Pentecostals, the Sabbatarians) were joined by a number of new ones (Truth from Sion, The Bulgarian Church of God, Word of Life, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.), including some (e.g. "Roma-Turk"), whose activity is directed mainly toward Gypsies and Muslims. These churches are especially effective and spreading fast among the

inhabitants of large urban ghettos. In some urban Gypsy neighbourhoods the evangelists have started to prevail (as in Kyustendil); in other places they are joined by entire communities (viz., the "Goli tsignani" in Sliven, the "Valadzii" in Pazardzhik, "Daleta" in Kardzhali, etc.), including some of the "Gypsies who tend to identify with the Turks" (in the last case we might see some syncretic modifications of Islam in an evangelical sense).

The success of Evangelical churches and sects among the Gypsies could be explained by a number of factors and circumstances. We must stress that this is not a unique phenomenon peculiar only to Bulgaria. This practice is world-wide and the Pentecostal church in particular has had a marred influence on Gypsies in many countries in the world. All the evangelical churches in Bulgaria center their attention on the poorest and most underprivileged members of the Gypsy community, segregated not only from the macrosociety but also from the rest of the Gypsies. In doing so the religious missions offer an alternative to those of the Gypsy community who have turned to anomie: and this should be justly appreciated. Some additional factors enhance this influence: the simplified ordination of ministers (after very short training) from the community midst; a very appealing religious service for Gypsies (discussion of problems faced by members of the community and services with a lot of music and hymns [12]; satisfaction of the need for miracles (the usually given reason for having joined the church is the cure of the sick who have "accepted God"); including economic factors in times of an acute economic crisis (compare an often heard statement: "Their weddings are beautiful. They get together, sing, and serve refreshments. No expenses such as we have and no fuss. Today, with these high prices, everyone will join them").

Why this multifariousness and syncretism of religious practices is observable only among the sedentary Gypsies from the community of the so-called "Jerlii" (but not in all its sub-groups) is a justifiable question. The answer can be found, first of all, in the very social structure of the Gypsy community and the development of the ethnic processes among some of its groups. In those segments where the "classical" form of the Gypsy ethnic community is retained as an inter-group ethnic community with its corresponding main units, in the well preserved, vital and functional Gypsy groups there is no need to substitute or modify the religion. But among those groups who have lost most of their main characteristics there is a striving to fill the vacuum with new forms. Hence, the change of religion (and as a result the religious syncretism) the adoption of new religions (the evangelical churches being regarded precisely as such). The acceptance of an individual or a group in a given religious community is an opportunity to leave the marginal life and find a new lifestyle. A change of religion or the conversion to a new religion is often seen as a possibility to seek out a new place in the overall structure of the macro-society, to adjust to new conditions, to find an outlet from the crisis in one's own ethnic body; in Balkan conditions (where ethnic and religious identity are often confused) this could be a way to change one's own ethnic attribution (as in cases where there is an assimilation with Turks). Moreover, this trend indicates the existence of an attempted modification in the group mechanism of social life through substitution with new patterns and rapprochement to the dominant standards of the macro-society. In any case, religion continues to perform its function of integrating and segregating, i.e. it is instrumental in the integration of the Gypsy groups into the meta-group communities and sets them apart from other subdivisions of the Gypsy people.

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ODNOSI ETNIČKE I KONFESIONALNE SVESTI ROMA U BUGARSKOJ

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Uopšte uzevši, bugarski Romi su istočni pravoslavci i muslimani, odnosno, oni pripadaju dvema glavnim verama u Bugarskoj. Sem toga, različite protestantske vere danas takođe vrše snažan uticaj (i često se smatraju "sektama" u Bugarskoj), a i pojedine evanđelijske crkve regrutuju sledbenike među Romima.

Predloženi rad razmatra odnose etničke i konfesionalne svesti Roma u Bugarskoj. Pod uticajem praktikovane vere i ispoljavanja etničke samosvesti, tradicionalna hijerarhija Roma u Bugarskoj je promenjena, a grupe preraspoređene. Promena vere ili preobraćanje u novu veru često se doživljavaju kao mogućnosti traženja novog mesta u ukupnoj strukturi okruženja, prilagođavanja novim uslovima, traženja izlaza iz krize u sopstvenom etničkom telu; u balkanskim

uslovima (gde se etnički i verski identitet često mešaju) ovo može takođe biti način da se promeni sopstveni etnički status.

Ova tendencija, štaviše, pokazuje pokušaj da se izvrše promene u grupnom mehanizmu društvenog života putem zamene novim obrascima i usklađivanjem sa dominantnim standardima makro društva. U svakom slučaju, vera nastavlja do dan danas da vrši svoju ulogu integracije i podvajanja, to jest, ona je instrumentalizovana u cilju integracije romskih grupa u romske meta grupne zajednice i time teži da ih odvoji od drugih grupacija romskog naroda.