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## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ROMA: INTERCULTURALISM IN EDUCATION \*

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**Abstract.** *Regarding the sphere of education, it has been shown that the Roma are almost without schooling. They are without chance for bilingual schooling from pre-school to University age. This dishonorable state that every modern European country should be ashamed of seems to be liable to slow and painless changes by introducing the program of intercultural education. Indeed, the possibility for establishing an intercultural education system is an enormous opportunity for the Roma. At the same time, it is an opportunity for our community to prove that it moves toward the modern civil society establishment. However, it is also necessary to view these chances realistically. There are many barriers to overcome by interculturalism, since there is a gap between, on one hand, one theoretical concept and human striving and, on the other hand, the achieved critical and qualitative state of the subjective consciousness of most non-Roma and Roma concerning the intercultural model and objective chances for its realization.*

**Key words:** Roma, interculturalism, education.

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"The sharp dividing line between the two spheres of linguistic communication corresponds to an ethnic distance toward the Roma, to their space isolation (colonies or settlements of the Roma, separated from non-Romani communities, traveling camps), to social policy (marital endogamy of the Roma) and to state policy. The process of breaking up ethnic barriers which is spontaneous or inspired by assimilation policy (settlement and expansion of the Roma, employment and work with non-Roma, elementary children education) is accompanied with instances of overstepping the linguistic communication limits (in-group communication in dialect or communication with non-Roma in the language of the majority)."

*A. Mirga and L. Mruz*

#### INTRODUCTION

Unlike other peoples living together with the Serbs in our country, the Roma are in a considerably more complex and unfavorable situation. Though their lagging behind is not uniform, the fact is that they are late in most forms of emancipation, being only on the verge of their comprehensive national prosperity. To put it in a more strict way, the Roma are still being ghettoized and discriminated in the economic, political and *cultural sphere*. Up to now, Yugoslav sociologists have investigated numerous ways out of this inhuman situation as has been more comprehensively reported on somewhere else (Đorđević, 1988).

Our opinion is that the Roma - being in a trans-ethnic situation, meaning living everywhere and all the time with many other peoples and cultures - "The Roma in an intercultural environment" - can find the theoretical and practical **intercultural approach** most suitable to them, namely, the approach which is currently and lately promoted by sociologists as well (Jakšić, 1995; 1997; 1998; 1999). Though interculturalism - this "fashionable" world movement - has already been subjected to strict critical scrutiny (Katunarić, 1996), while its first promoters are aware of its limited effect, especially in the "socialist commonwealth" broken down into parts, *it still represents newly-found wisdom that offers an alternative to multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities*. Thus, the theoretical and practical interculturalism becomes prominent with respect to the Roma, that is, their chances for emancipation in intercultural ambiance are growing. It is a small paradox that, despite the economic and political spheres, it is in the cultural sphere that the forms of ghettoization and discrimination, xenophobia and racism are the most painful, while, at the same time, it is in the culture (in a narrow sense, meaning education, means of mass communication...) - in view of the fact that emancipation is far more demanding in the economic and political domains - that the intercultural approach has the best possibilities for deciding upon the "fate" of the Roma.

## INTERCULTURALISM AND EDUCATION

Regarding the sphere of education, it has been shown that the Roma are almost with no schooling: "The Roma are, namely, an ethnic group with the greatest number of illiterate people (34,8% - concerning the data dating 1981), as well as the greatest number with unfinished elementary school regarding the overall Serbian population (78,7%). It should also be stressed that in 1981 only 0,4% (or 181) of the Roma has a University education. It is probable that the situation has not been changed in the last fifteen years." (Mitrović and Zajić, 1998: 42-43). They are without chance for *bilingual schooling* from pre-school to University age. (To illustrate, we are mentioning the elementary school "Vuk Karadžić", located in the "Romani town" at the edge of the inner city of Niš, attended exclusively by the Romani children in Serbian - there are no Serbians at all. It does not mean that there are no Serbian children in this section of the town; it means that the parents send them to considerably further "purely Serbian" schools which is an emblematic example of discrimination and xenophobia.) This dishonorable state that every modern European country should be ashamed of seems to be liable to slow and painless changes by introducing the program of *intercultural education* that involves the following domains: upbringing and education of culturally different peoples, bicultural and bilingual upbringing and education, upbringing and education about cultural differences or cultural understanding, upbringing and education for cultural pluralism, upbringing and education for international understanding and cooperation (Spajić-Vrkaš, 1993).

Still, the intercultural solution is neither simple nor easy, since it, as a global orientation towards identical evaluation of all cultural peculiarities, present in a concrete community, implies, among other things, radical changes in the institutional educational system. First and most of all, it implies critical questioning of the existing process of education and upbringing, and, possibly, planning of the future institutional system based upon new, European tendencies. Thus, it turns out that the questioning as well as solving of the problems of one ethnic group - in this case, of autochthonic Romani community - tends to be coupled with not only radical changes of the Romani position in a wider social context but, also, with appropriate changes of the overall educational system.

Analyses of the relationship between the majority and minority cultures, as well as between the minority cultures themselves, stress insufficiently or often not at all, mutual understanding of linguistic peculiarities, religions, customs and ways of life, gender relations, everyday life and spare time occupations and other cultural sectors. That is why the Roma should be provided with better conditions and institutional facilities for education, learning and expressing their own cultural identity as well as interaction with the majority and other cultural groups. The emphasis is usually put on education of the Roma themselves as well as on improvement and development of the educational system adopted to their needs (questioning of national identity, articulation of their own national history and cultural achievements, learning of Romani language and dialects on the SRY territory, etc.) It is for this reason that it is necessary to prepare teaching syllabus in *the Romani language as well as in the language of their mother culture and the language of a minority group* which turns out to be the majority one in their vicinity (Albanians in Kosovo or Hungarians in Vojvodina) in addition to providing for schooling of Romani teaching staff.

Since the Romani educational position is a product of their overall social position, it is necessary to investigate the degree to which the existing institutional schooling system is a reflection of the overall social attitude to them, and, thus, the extent to which it is permeated with the intercultural idea. In other words, it is necessary to examine if and to what degree the present system is based upon the leading principles of interculturalism such as: attitude towards one's own culture and cultures in the immediate vicinity, awareness of common, mutually permeated contribution to making a cultural outlook of particular area, active engagement in reducing the existing prejudice (racial, ethnic, religious,...), respect of human rights and education for peace and tolerance. The examination of the ways in which these principles are expressed or not in practice can point to the road to be taken, if the realization of one truly multicultural orientation is really tended to.

#### ABSENCE OF INTERCULTURALISM: EXAMPLES FROM HIGH-SCHOOL EDUCATION

The research concentrated on some of the above-listed aspects, namely, an analysis of the stage of development of an awareness about permeation of cultures as well as active engagement for reduction of the existing prejudices, focused on the Romani nationality and on randomly chosen samples from the current high education practice, has shown the following:

1. In high schools, even those claiming to provide the education needed for the profession of a "cultural technician", there is no subject that clearly and precisely deals with the cultural studies, meaning, which would open up the possibilities for creating an awareness of one's cultural identity as well as the identity of other peoples, along with development of active interaction and tolerance; instead, there is a series of subject matters - such as the studies of language and literature, history, arts and music and so on - aiming to present, partially and with no global insight, cultural achievements in segments; therefore, there is no possibility of perceiving synchronous and intricate connections between the history of one nation, its development, identity and cultural contributions of other cultures to it.

2. No synchronous contributions of diverse cultures to the overall culture of the mixed community are given, though it is stated many times, sometimes with pride, that particular regions, or the country as a whole, were created and further developed at the cultural crossroads and in culturally heterogeneous communities, while stressing the mingling of many ethnic groups, religions and confessions, customs and languages or, generally, traditions.

3. There are almost no contents related to various spheres of the Romani culture.

To illustrate, a few examples can be presented to confirm the third of the above-listed statements. In two history textbooks - that are, according to the current curricula, expected, more than others, to give an insight into synchronous views of the cultural developments, of course, in historical perspective - the Roma are almost never mentioned.

In the history textbook entitled History for the Gymnasium (Third Year) of General Orientation and of Social-linguistic Specialization and for Specialized High Schools (Third Year) (Perović and Novaković, 1993) dealing with the history till the mid-19th century, the Roma are not mentioned at all. A somewhat different situation is to be found

in the textbook entitled History for the Gymnasium (Third Year) for Natural-Mathematical Specialization and Gymnasium (Forth Year) of General Orientation and of Social-Linguistic Specialization (Gaćeša and others, 1996) in which the Roma are mentioned seven or eight times, only as victims of the Second World War. In the section dealing with the racist nazi ideology (p. 162), it is stated that "the Gypsies (Roma) are treated as the lowest human species." And that is all! It is not even necessary now to try to describe how the young Roma feel, once and if they manage to become students of the third or fourth high school year, either in gymnasium or in the school for "culturological technicians" without having a chance to read a single word about their own race, except in the context of genocide.

The textbook entitled Geography for the First or Third High School Year (Rodić, 1993) does not mention the Roma at all. In the section explaining the population of a multi-national state (p. 56), they are implied in the category of "others", while on the next page (57), the scheme graphically presents their presence without, at the same time, stating their number or percentage they make in the overall population. If the population structure is followed regarding the regions, it can be concluded that the majority of them lives in the region named as "Montenegro hills and plains" and "Old Romanian plain." It is obvious that in other regions the Roma are regarded as "others." It is doubtless that these sections of the book are written on the basis of the official Census data; however, the objection can still be made regarding the fact that in the society that tends to become or will, in future, tend to proclaim itself as multicultural, any disregard or failure to make a correct record of one numerous minority people living in it is an important indicator of its real orientation.

In the three referred textbooks dealing with music - namely, Musical Culture for High School (Bratić and Dragutinović, 1992), Musical Culture for the First and Second Year of Specialized Education Schools (Kučkalić, 1992), and Musical Culture for Gymnasium and Specialized Schools (Marinković, 1996) - the Roma are not mentioned at all, though even a layman can say that they have also influenced the music of these regions, if not in many spheres of music, then at least in the sphere of folklore. It is enough comfort to know that the above-mentioned textbooks, anyway, look quite old-fashioned at the end of the 20th century or that at least in one of them that pretends to be following modern developments there is a sentence about new folk music (with a relatively adequate evaluation) - while the Romani music is completely left out once again.

The Roma are not mentioned even in the book entitled Contributions to Literature Teaching (Stanisavljević, 1996) which is not considered a compulsory primary source, but which, unfortunately is an indispensable companion of almost every high school student in Serbia; it pays "proper tribute" to the poets and writers of Serbia - proclaiming the faith in "the future and great possibilities of Serbian people". The "Gypsies" are mentioned in the commentary upon the works of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, along with all the respect paid to the rich Romani musical and lyrical tradition that inspired the great poet; at the same time, the "Gypsies" are also noted for their symbolic presence in the works of the Serbian writer Bora Stanković. Only this time there is no commentary concerning the co-existence of the Serbs and the Roma. Without interpreting the way Stanković involves the Roma in his works, the author of the book Contributions seems to be mentioning the Roma just as pure characterological reference, without going into explaining the symbolism relevant for the symbolic structure.

Stanisavljević, for instance, while alluding to the most misfortunate legal case in which Bora Stanković had to defend himself against the accusations of the authentic person that served as a model for his heroine Koštana, says the following:

"While defending himself from the atrocious and primitive Gypsy, Stanković once said, 'You should be grateful to me, Koštana. You know what you were like.'"

Therefore, while the Serbian writer addresses his heroine by her proper name, the critic commenting upon his work, uses the phrase "the atrocious and primitive Gypsy", thus connecting her personality with an offensive stereotype. For this reason it appears obvious that some racial and national stereotypes are not only rejected, but even fostered by some of the poorly-written textbooks.

To sum up, these are some of the starting assumptions that can be made by analyzing the currently used books. Regarding the interculturalist credo they do not appear encouraging at all.

#### CONCLUSION

Until a comprehensive system of upbringing and education of the Roma is established in Yugoslavia, namely, the system that would comprise *their education and upbringing in regular school system, additional forms of education and upbringing for all the Romani children as well as a system of education and upbringing specifically suited to the Roma*, it would be desirable, as it has already been done in Croatia (Hrvatić, 1996:928), to undertake activities for: - "completion of school curricula of the elementary and high schools with contents related to the Romani culture (history, geography, arts, music, literature) for all the students, regardless of the presence and number of the Roma in a particular school or region; - establishment of specific forms of education and upbringing in the schools attended by the Roma, both regarding the contents (through modified curricula: introduction of optional subject matters - Romani language and literature, culture and history of the Roma) as well as preparation of adequate school forms of teaching in multi-ethnic communities (cooperative learning - a possibility) that can provide for both the cooperation and the compensation for group inequality which is, mostly in the case of the Romani children, the result of external influences."

Indeed, the possibility for establishing an intercultural education system is an enormous opportunity for the Roma. At the same time, it is an opportunity for our community to prove that it moves toward the modern civil society establishment. However, it is also necessary to view these chances realistically. There are many barriers to overcome by interculturalism, since there is a gap between, on one hand, one theoretical concept and human striving and, on the other hand, the achieved critical and qualitative state of the subjective consciousness of most non-Roma and Roma concerning the intercultural model and objective chances for its realization.

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## ROMSKA PRILIKA: INTERKULTURALIZAM U OBRAZOVANJU

**Dragoljub B. Đorđević, Dragana R. Mašović**

*Uzmemo li obrazovno polje, pokazuje se da su Romi skoro bez ikakve školske spreme. Oni su bez mogućnosti za bilingvalno usavršavanje od predškolskog uzrasta do fakultetske dobi. To nedostojno stanje, ne služeći na čast niti jednoj savremenoj evropskoj državi, čini se da bi se moglo polagano i bezbolno izmeniti koncipiranjem programa interkulturalnog obrazovanja.*

*Interkulturalistički put nije nimalo jednostavan i lak, jer on, kao globalna orijentacija u pravcu podjednako vrednovanja svih kulturnih osobnosti, prisutnih u konkretnoj zajednici, podrazumeva, između ostalog, i korenite promene u institucionalnom školstvu. To, najpre i iznad svega, znači kritičko preispitivanje postojećeg obrazovno-vaspitanog procesa i, eventualno zatim, planiranje budućeg institucionalnog sistema na novim, evropski usmerenim tendencijama. Tako*

*ispada da izučavanje i rešavanje problema jedne manjinske grupe - u ovom slučaju autohtone nacionalne zajednice Roma – jeste skopčano, sem sa izmenom položaja Roma u širem socijalnom kontekstu, i sa odgovarajućom promenom ukupnog obrazovnog sistema. Uistinu je zaživljavanje interkulturalnog obrazovanja golema romska šansa - ujedno i prilika da naša zajednica pokaže kako se kreće prema modernom ustrojstvu civilnog društva.*

*No u ovim stvarima treba biti čvrsto na zemlji. Niz je prepreka isprečen ispred interkulturalizma, jer su jedno teorijske zamisli i humane pobude, a drugo dosegnuto kritičko i kvalitetno stanje subjektivne svesti većine ne-Roma i Roma o interkulturalnom modelu i objektivne mogućnosti njegovog oživotvoravanja.*

**Ključne reči:** *Romi, interkulturalizam, obrazovanje*