

The Church and Migration: The Role of Faith in Social Integration and Behavior Change of the Roma People

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ABSTRACT: Roma or Gypsies are originally a migratory people who today are spread across several continents and living in many countries, especially on the continent of Europe. Several sources indicate that 8 million of Roma live in Eastern Europe. Romania has the largest Roma population in the area, over 535,000 persons according to the latest official estimates. The changes that have occurred over the last 20 years in Europe Central and Eastern Europe, it made a large number of Roma people migrate to Western European countries. This raised a new kind of issues in Western, but also in Eastern Europe, the authorities sometimes, reaching the point of no longer find solutions in the management of Roma issues. This paper proposes that we look not only at state responsibilities to solve these issues but also to the church responsibilities to spread the message that can change their behavior.

KEY WORDS: Immigration, Emigration, Migration, Gypsy, Roma people, Culture Church Mission.

Roma People: A People with Migrant Origins and Migratory Trend

In the book *Gypsies from Romania a minority in transition*, Emanuelle Pons identifies the term “Roma as coming from Sanskrit (original: romani) means *man, married man* and, in a broader sense, the *person belonging to our group*.”¹ The term was contrasted with *gadzo, gadza,*

which means *he, they*, ie the non-Roma, ie the different from us. About the origin of this people there were more theories, but mainly two of these took a more pronounced place in the debates, that is: some contend that the Roma come from India, while others attest their origin in Egypt.

The Indian origins of the Roma had been supported by linguistic and historic arguments. One of the scholars who ascribed Indian origin to the Roma language was István Wali, a Hungarian student in theology, in the Netherlands. He noted a striking similarity between the language of his fellow Indians and the language spoken by the Roma in Hungary.² Researcher, Donald Kenrick,³ claimed that the Roma left India in the third century when Shah Ardashir (224-241 AD) conquered northern India and transformed it into a colony of Persia. In these circumstances, the Roma resettlement has occurred gradually and in a peaceful manner, and one of the reasons was that the wealth of Persian Empire began to attract various emigrants. One of the reasons for their departure from India—according to Crişan Niculae’s theory was that “the last class, pariah, it is of those disinherited of the life, the people without any right than to live, do the hardest menial work. Suffice to say that pariah was a caste (class) so devoid of any religious and social rights.”⁴ The basic thesis of most authors is that the Gypsies were the pariah of India and that their departure from the country is explained by the attitude and behavior of upper castes, ranging from contempt to murder.

Roma’s Egyptian roots (in addition to other hypotheses on their origins) were described by Vasile Burtea, who wrote that:

For a long time, it was believed that the Roma have their origins in Egypt. For this reason, the British, and others after them, called them *Gypsie*, that is “Egyptians” or those who came from Egypt. There were assumptions, opinions or speculation affirming that the Roma People are Persians and Phoenicians, or Turks and Tatars left after wars fought in these places. Folkloric expressions affirm that they were to be baptized by the Pharaohs (mocking allusion to Egyptian origins). According to some, they were inhabitants, while for others, even the founders of ancient Rome, or the Roman

Empire (from *romaios* = citizen of Rome) and even . . . ancient inhabitants of Dacia that kept sacred key elements of language, customs, traditions, etc.⁵

Thus, chroniclers, especially those from the medieval period, have identified the Roma with the Egyptians because of the dark color of their skin, much like that of the native population of Egypt. The chroniclers present Gypsies as a people “dark skin,” having its own hierarchical structures and claiming that their homeland is the Little Egypt.

A well-defined position on the Roma origin is the Indian hypothesis supported especially by the linguistic argument, “in the language of the Roma have been identified over 500 Indian words whose origin can be easily recognized.”⁶

Related to their origin first appears the dimension of migration, “the initial migration to the northwestern Indian subcontinent, followed by migration outside India.”⁷ Roma migrated from India in the Byzantine Empire, and in the eleventh century were scattered in different parts of the empire. The migration of the Roma to the Byzantine Empire was a gradual process that took several decades, and was probably a consequence of the advances of the Seljuk Turks in Armenia. Here, the Roma were named *athinganoi*, name originally assigned a heretical sects present in the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh century, which means untouchable (not recommended for contact with them.) It is possible that through their different living style and non-interference with other communities, Roma has been likened to that sect followers and, therefore, have received the same designation from the Byzantine population.

During the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries the Roma spread in south-east and central Europe, as well as in North Africa. Roma people entered into the North America and South America only in the nineteenth century.

Today the Roma are spread across several continents and live in several countries, but mostly in the southeastern part of Europe. Several sources indicate a total of 12 million of which 10 million inhabitants of Europe, 8 million in the countries of Eastern Europe. Romania has the largest Roma population—over 535,000

persons—according to the latest official estimates, between 1.5-2 million according to unofficial dates.

Despite an attempt to systematize the origins and the migration of the Roma, it is generally recognized that the Roma is not a homogenous population. They are divided, at least in Romania, in about 40 groups arranged according to family ties, professions, dialect, sedentary or nomad lifestyle.

The main groups include: *ursarii* (bear trainers and performers), *căldărarii* (coppersmiths manufacturers and repairers of copper vessels), *fierarii* (blacksmiths, farriers) *crăstarii* (vendors horses), *spoitorii* (pots and kitchen saucepan), *rudarii* (working with wood), *boldenii* (flower sellers), *argintarii* (silverware, jewelers), *zlătarii* (extract gold from riverbeds), and others. There are very important linguistic differences between the groups.⁸

This reflection on their origin and migration throughout the centuries on various continents can lead to the conclusion that migration is itself part of their identity. Also, this is confirmed by the way the Roma, from different countries, relate to each other. After thirty years from the founding of The International Romani Union, at the 5th World Romany Congress in 2000, they issued an official declaration that Romany are a non-territorial nation. A special approach and different from other nations, namely their national identity is not linked to a territory advances their evidence for migration as part of their identity, but what makes a nation are the customs and traditions they promote. However at the first World Romani Congress organized in 1971 near London—funded in part by the World Council of Churches and the Government of India—their the green and blue flag from the 1933 conference, embellished with the red, sixteen-spoked chakra, was reaffirmed as the national emblem of the Romani people, and the anthem, “Gelem, Gelem” was adopted.

In the context of democratization after 1990, easing border and eastward enlargement of the European Union, the Roma visibility acquired new dimensions with the new wave of migration from Eastern Europe toward Western Europe with a more developed economy. For Roma this migration, according to Professor Mircea Duțu, was relatively easy because:

“. . . whatever European country they live, Gypsies have one language and nationality, even identical habits, more or less obvious. However, in France, Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland and Belgium they remained registered from a century ago as nomads. This exceptional administrative regime generated a systematic supervision of movement. . . And the state of nomadic or ‘person in permanent circulation’ is considered as a new nationality. As remarked in this regard Henriette Asseo, a Frenchwoman continues to be considered the administratively a ‘nomad’ and provided with a traveling permit, even if its commercial activities require relatively small displacements. ‘This represents to ignore seniority of presence in specific the national territory and its total integration,’ concludes the specialist.”⁹

Europe became a continent attractive to immigrants because of incentives legislative and economic interests that of some EU countries. Europe could not restrict the access of Roma coming from Romania and Bulgaria due to the fact that they were not simple immigrants, but they came through their home countries joining the EU, and now are European citizens. According to Oleg Brega, through this massive migration of Roma “leaders of European countries have tried to resolve the issue of differences between European citizens equal by law, as they knew better, sometimes flagrant violation of human rights, violating interstate agreements and European regulations in force.”¹⁰

This tension between the status of Roma citizens in Europe and other citizens and the conduct of ethnic Roma made the issue of Roma a topic on the political agenda of the European Union. At the continental level, they initiated special programs for their social and economic integration. But up to this, massive expulsions of Roma were, especially in France and, earlier, Italy. In the summer of 2010 it is estimated that the French authorities have expelled more than a thousand Roma¹¹ coming mostly from Romania, and later destroying their unauthorized camps. *Il Giornale* reported on 22 April 2011 about such a case, and the statement quoting the mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno: “We identified 161 people, of which 67% are

criminals. It is not true that they have nowhere to live. Many have houses in their home country and they come to Rome not because of the desperate situation, but in hope to have higher incomes, even illegally obtained." All these actions of expulsion, also applying certain hidden bad treatments to Roma, led to diplomatic tensions between states and debates within EU bodies. All parties agree that the solution to solving this issue at European level has to do with Roma social integration and not discriminatory actions. The social integration of Roma is a subject that requires an extended analysis. However, for the purpose of this paper I'll continue offer a brief analysis of the culture and the behavior of the Roma in society, and how the Church can become involved in their integration in society.

Cultural Particularities and Ethical Challenges

On the one hand, some believe that the integration of Roma among other cultures is an easy task. For example, Oleg Brega claims that:

Roma, by the way they have adapted various cultures that came in contact with along history and wanderings through the world, seems to constitute a paradigm of interculturalism, a model for other Europeans. Some scholars believe that the first contact with European civilization Roma took more than they gave: borrowed religions, words, phrases, traditions and tools. However, they remained authentic, faithful to their ancestral traditions.¹²

On the other hand, some believe that social integration of Roma is through behavioral changes, and they represent an abandonment of such customs and traditions that project an immoral character and keeping the custom and traditions of those who are moral. The argument that any culture is a whole and that it cannot come off the negative elements is a false."Personally, I support the possibility of changing a culture because, as I stated on a different occasion,

although each culture struggles to preserve the values acquired along the recorded time every culture develops various trends over time. These trends do not require a total detachment from the cultural background of the original human community. An attack on the identity of that community, by redefining elements of life or by adding others, is an attack on the original fundament."¹³

Roma culture today manifests a combination of old habits that come from its historical past and modern elements of our world. The progress of society has not determined the complete break with the past, Roma communities proving a greater resistance to external influences than the majority population.

What are the Main Characteristics of Roma Culture?

1) The Centrality of Family, as the First and Most Important Social Group

Every family culture should be important, but for the Roma community this has a special role. The entire social structure of the individual life is around the family and the community is nothing but the gathering of individual families and extended families; that is the larger family. An important role in traditional Roma family plays "amare phure" ("our elders" or "our grandparents.") The first aspect to note is that the name refers to blood relatives—grandparents—and to all the elders in the community, respecting and caring for both. "Eun le phuren, on hale maj but manro sar tute" ("Listen to the elders, they ate more bread than you.") Never a traditional Roma family will send their elders to a nursing home, however poor they are, and however luxurious the nursing home may be.

The elders are the reference of the extended family, have the highest status in the traditional Roma community, they (if men), are the judges (krisinitoră) of the community. The high status of the old man emerges from wisdom, honor, experience, balance and responsibility. At least, in theory, male-female roles are not identified

as superior-inferior, but they are complementary: the man is the head of the family and is responsible for maintenance his wife and children. He is responsible for the education of children, housework, including food preparation and supervision of sick or elderly family members. This emphasis on masculinity may have generated by the significance of name Roma, meaning man or married man. Roma people, in social dimension, have a communitarian understanding; they are people-oriented relational and for them relationships matter.

Family law is one of purity laws, the basic principle of traditional education is the *lajimos Roma's* ("shame"), and the girl's virginity at marriage has the value of a sacrament, because it is the basis of Roma morality. The so-called "bride price" covers exactly this value, and it is superior to the beauty, the diligence and the modesty of the girl, or her family's wealth and status. Guarantee soundness and sustainability marriage, *încuscriirii* cohesion and a good treatment of the girl in new family.

It is known that they try resolving contentious issues in the interior of the community, at a "divano" (talks) or if necessary, convene *Kris Romani* (Gypsy judgment). *Kris* is a court-fledged composed of different "Viți" and it is monopolized by men; it consists of a council of elders and one or more judges—all men. Women seldom speak in *kris's*, but they may do so if they are directly involved in the conflict. They get married at an early age: boys 14-15 years old and girls to 12-13 years old.

2) A Community with Marginal Trends

Certain isolation from the majority population and especially maintaining a certain measure of migratory nature, according to Elena Zamfir and Cătălin Zamfir,

were effective defensive strategies, but they also had a side effect: perpetuating marginalization. The Roma community has developed an active strategy of survival on the margins of society, in poverty and self-isolation. Self-marginalization by their own behavior is a way of obtaining acceptance and tolerance, and therefore its price.¹⁴

This attitude creates a complex “victim of discrimination” feeling on the one hand, and a comfortable marginalization, on the another. It explains why they placed their camp on the outskirts of a village, from where they come and visit the town. The interaction with the majority population is limited as they later withdrew in their own community.

3) Specific Occupations According with Migratory Character

It is likely that the original Roma population have been characterized by a specialization in certain types of jobs, complementary to agriculture that involve migratory nature. As a community the job they have are: ursarii (give performances bears), căldărarii (coppersmiths - manufactured and repaired copper vessels), fierarii (blacksmiths, farriers) crăstarii (vendors horses), spoitorii (pots and kitchen saucepan), rudarii (working with wood), boldenii (flower sellers), argintarii (silverware, jewelers), zlătarii (extract gold from riverbeds) etc.

4) Belief in Superstitions and Cultural Ethics

About their faith can say that:

Their initial belief was very similar to that of Medo-Persians who believed in two main: Ormuzd, the principle of good and Ahriman, the evil principle; These two main manifestation with equal possibilities in the surrounding world. Gypsies believe in Del-God, the principle of good, and Beng, principle of evil. Gypsies opposite attitude of the two superpowers is always observant, considering that her man can only be a spectator outside the two main battle that equal possibility to influence the evolution of phenomena surrounding world.¹⁵

This kind of approach show that they do not believe in a personal God and sovereign, and as a result is slipping in all sorts of superstitions. Superstition is one of the most common types of popular beliefs it is believed that certain beings or things have supernatural powers that can influence the life of people. Roma people religion can be

filled with the memory of some strange superstitions that embraces faith. Fear rabbit (*Sosoi*) is manifested by the belief that approaching a rabbit alive or dead means misfortune. Fear snake (SAP) is common in former nomadic gypsies. Just the fear of naked neck chickens with superstition is rooted in religion Gypsies. Among elementary religion borrowed most entrenched is the belief that the dead can turn into the undead. This can be explained by the fact that Gypsies are generally a fearful people.

In addition there are habits loaded with mystical elements such as when the child was born, the young mother is covered immediately with a jacket or other clothing to her husband or one who is responsible fatherhood and to the place of birth is make a fire to take away the traces (fairies) evil baby just now want to kidnap the mother and it turned to a vampire. When the child dies before baptism or born dead, sprinkle the grave, before lowering body with milk taken from the mother, because her breasts dry up soon to milk without harming them. Good is also spraying the tomb of unbaptized child with rainwater collected from the eaves of a church.

Because of superstitious and mystical beliefs and personal and collective morality was influenced to assist generally in the adoption of cultural ethics as a principal reference. Cultural ethics argues that ethical truth is conditioned by the system of values and moral habits of a culture determined. The essence of cultural relativism is that good and evil can be judged subjectively or relative only by reference to a specific company and each company has its own moral system.

Anchoring in the cultural system of which I have spoken so far, leads to behavior that can be characterized by stealing, begging, violence, murder. And all these have created an attitude of rejection from the majority population, especially in countries of Europe where they migrated.

5) A People with Special Artistic Qualities

All historians and ethnographers are unanimous in recognizing the Gypsies' special artistic qualities. Well there are not any locality in Romania and any party that does not represent Gypsy folk music singers.

Faith, Church and Holistic Transformation

In order to integrate Roma into society is needed so the change in behavior from them, and changing the attitude of society towards them. Not only governmental institutions and social protection bodies should do something about it, but especially the church.

First of all, the Church has to share and show the love of God to all men. Christians believe that divine love is essential to experience God's ethics. Track the love must emanate from God, who "loved us first"; she must conquer the Christian heart, who love God so much that he will not be burdened with wishful thinking. Then comes love for people is subconsecventă love of God. In fact, the Bible says that it is impossible to love God and also to hate your brother. Finally reaching the love of self, that self-esteem, or more accurately, the humble personal appreciation that our value was won at Calvary through death of Jesus Christ.

The essence of ethical behavior occurs in what we might call the "golden rule" of Christianity: "All that you desire to make you people do ye even so to them." (Matthew, 7:12). Being accepted by others helps the individual to accept himself. Unfortunately, many people live without a sense of appreciation because they are too aware of their mistakes and failures.

Christ has acquired a real human nature, and we are all included in this nature. With restored the link between God and man is everyone's duty to acquire salvation.

Three important components serve as its support to the call of reconciliation:

- Initiative (the Heavenly Father)
- Call (Church who carry forward the apostolic message)
- a response (human believer)

Reconciliation begins with a change of attitude on the part of God that trigger a change of attitude of the believer to God. In apostolic definition of sin is the transgression of God's law - so attitude

and act of hostility towards the Heavenly Father. In the process of reconciliation meet three essential factors:

- who conceives and offer—this is the position of God;
- He who brings out potentially—this is the position of the Son incarnate, dead and risen;
- The receiving it (the man who repents)

Christ has acquired a real human nature, and are included in this nature and we all .With restored the link between God and man is everyone’s duty to acquire salvation.

Secondly, the Church has to serve practically all people in society. Bishop Virgil Bercea at Conference “Roma Migration: dilemmas and perspectives of the European Union” (19/02/2015) organized by the Diocesan Caritas Oradea with Greek-Catholic Diocese of Oradea stated that the Church has a very important role in giving meaning to life these people are children of God like everyone else in them as close as most are really being hard test, but with chief plays a fundamental role in creating them within education. “As always, the Church tried to be close, more so today, because along with being quite excluded, intervened including migration, which is a worldwide phenomenon and not only them, Roma but all of us into all sides. But the fundamental role of the Church is trying to create a culture and him out of this situation where they are refused, in general, from school education, culturalization.”

Thirdly, the church is God’s instrument for holistic change the individual and society. The church is God’s instrument for the individual and society changed holistic “to experience the change we need to access God’s power source and acknowledge that there is no such power in ourselves. “Faith is not a part of the Christian life is even entirely Christian life. The term holistic emphasizes the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts. Change a person does not consider only the spiritual side, but also the intellectual, physical and social.

In 2014 in order to see how faith has changed the behavior of Roma in Romania I developed and applied a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions to a total of 100 Roma people who live in rural and

in urban areas. The number of respondents is 65% male and 35% of the number of females. Among participants surveyed 7% of the Roma respondents had higher education, 15% had high school, 40% had secondary education, 38% of primary school. To the question "What are traditional practices which have influenced negative behavior prior to conversion?" Their answers show that 90% of people said that dancing, 85% mentioned music, and 80% gossip. To the question "What have you removed from life after you converted?" 65% of people dancing removed, 65% of people have eliminated gossip, 65% of people have eliminated robbery. At question "What do you think should be done to the Roma community in order to grow in the faith?" 90% people responded "applied faith," 85% people responded "read the Bible," 85% people responded "participation in church service," 85% people responded "to be honest (not be duplicitous).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Roma are by their very identity migrating are in constant motion, and this is not a problem for them. This nation no country has influenced their lifestyle. Their culture, like every culture, has non-moral issues are encouraged to be preserved, but also issues that conflict with moral values. Christianity means change, and this is possible.

NOTES

¹ Emmanuelle Pons, *Țigani din România o minoritate în tranziție*, (București: Editura Compania, 1995), 8.

² G. Sarău, *Rromii, India și limba rromani* (București: Editura Kriterion, 1998), 44-46.

³ Donald Kenrick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)* (2nd ed.). (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), xxxvii-xxxviii; 189.

⁴ Nicolae Crișan, *Țigani: mit și realitate*, (București: Editura Albatros, 1999), 22.

⁵ Vasile Burtea, *Rromii, În sincronia și diacronia populațiilor de contact* (București: Editura Lumina Lex, 2002), 25.

⁶ Cf. http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/tiganii_origini_si_raspandire_harta-18846

⁷ Cf. http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/tiganii_origini_si_raspandire_harta-18846

⁸ Cf. <http://www.intercultural.ro/carti/interculturalitate/romi.html>

⁹ Cf. Mircea Dușu, Află cum au ajuns romii în România și care e numărul lor, http://www.dcnews.ro/istoria-tiganilor-afla-cum-au-ajuns-romii-in-romania-si-care-e-numarul-lor_37152.html

¹⁰ Oleg Brega, *Europa și romii: Un test de viabilitate pentru UE, disertatie* (Iași: Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2011).

¹¹ Ibid., 26.

¹² Ibid., 3.

¹³ Daniel Fodorean, *Conducerea Bisericii în Postmodernism* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2011), 39.

¹⁴ Elena și Catalin Zamfir, *Țiganii între ignorare și îngrijorare* (București: Editura Alternative, 1993), 27-28.

¹⁵ Oprea X, *Studiu Etnologic: Minoritatea Etnică*, Universitatea de Nord, Baia Mare, 2011.