JEL: A13

ROMA COMMUNITY IN ALBANIA:
ALBANIANS' PERCEPTIONS AND THEIR IDENTITY

Elisabeta Osmanaj, PhD in Pedagogy, Associate Professor,

Education Sciences Faculty, Social Sciences Department,
"Aleksandër Xhuvani" University, Elbasan, Albania

Abstract: The Roma community was early settled in Albania around the XV century. UN has known them as a linguistic minority and legally compels the states, where they live to recognize them. In this research study based on the historical data analysis, the researcher has the intention to bring a clear picture of the Roma community situation in Albania, how they have come to this land and how they view Albanians. From the analysis of historical data and arguments drawn from important documents in the country, some misguided ideas and concepts have been analyzed for the Roma and the top executives of the state of Albanians. Roma diversity is other characteristic of this community preserved over the centuries. The color of this community make it very special in relation to the society, where they live, but this is also the reason for discrimination at certain historical moments. The report that Roma have with the local population in Albania has never been conflicting, but the local population has never accepted the Roma as an equal part. To overcome the barriers, we need to know, from this conclusion of this research study is this: to be informed as much about the history of the Roma, their way of life and their diversity.

Keywords: Roma community, diversity, perception, meckare, kabugi, roma, gipsy

INTRODUCTION

In the territory of Albania, alongside Albanians, there are also other ethnic groups such as Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Vlachos, Roma and Egyptians. In the 1989 census, data showed that other ethnic groups represented over 2% of the population (Albanian Statistical Yearbook, 1990). Other independent source says that these groups in Albania represent over 5% of the population (Berxoli, 2005). According to the Census (2011), the total number of Roma community in Albania ranges to 8.301 people (0.30% of the population). Meanwhile, a World Bank study on poverty (2002) divides ethnicities into 2 large groups: (1) those who live better than ethnic Albanians do and (2) those who live worse. Roma and Egyptians are part of the second group. According to Croatian sources (Crowe & Kolsti, 1991), some Roma families should have come to the Balkans around the XIV century and are located in Albanian territory around the nineteenth XV century. As did most of the Albanian population, the Roma community during the period of Ottoman Empire was converted for economic reasons or forcibly into Islamic religion. If in the Moldavian and Wallachia rulers Roma community were sold as slaves, while in the Austrian Empire and the Hungarian Kingdom they encouraged their assimilation by
force, Roma in the Western Balkans, although treated as second class population, coexisted in peace with the groups other ethnicities and could freely pass the borders. Koinova (2000) explains this to the fact that the Roma community was only one of the numerous minorities in the suburbs of the Ottoman Empire.

The proclamation of Albania's independence in 1912 was accompanied by a relatively better treatment of the Roma community (ERRC, 1997), though the social gap between the Roma and non-Roma population continued to exist (Koinova, 2000). During the Second World War, nearly half a million Roma communities from different parts of Europe were executed or killed in Nazi concentration camps (Ringold, Orenstein & Wilkens, 2003). In Albania, the treatment of the Roma community was relatively better and there were no concentration camps or ethnic cleansing (Ibid). Meanwhile, some of the Roma community participated actively in the National Liberation War alongside the Partisans. During the socialist period (1945-1990), the Roma community had significant improvements in housing, education, health care and social services. Like the Albanians, the Roma community enjoyed full employment, although some of them worked as unskilled workers (Fonseca, 1995). In the villages, they worked in agriculture and livestock. While in the cities, the Roma worked in the construction, public services and handicrafts (Taho, 2002). In addition, when private economic activities, after the 1976 Constitution, were punished by law, many of the Roma community continued small trade (De Soto, 2002), including the sale of horses, handicraft items and other products they purchased in the town and sold them to the village vice versa, playing the role of mediator between urban and rural areas (Courthiade & Duka, 1990). Consequently, their relative status vis-à-vis the Albanian population has improved.

During the post-socialist transition period, the Roma, as a result of the collapse and closure of state-owned enterprises, their unilateral professional character, low education and discrimination, moved from relative well-being to extreme poverty. Currently, they are the poorest and most marginalized ethnic group in Albania (De Soto, 2002). Poor and very poor families face high levels of social exclusion, because they are unable to cope with their daily needs and are less likely to be involved in processes that affect their individual livelihood, such as employment and education. Though historically the Roma community population has been poorer in Albania, the decline in the level of livelihood during the post-socialist transition was much faster than for some other groups of the population. This has created a vicious circle that reproduces illiteracy and low educational level, which further deepens their marginalization in society. On the other hand, the post-socialist transition towards market economy and democracy created new opportunities for the Roma community to organize by themselves to express their identity and protect their interests. Starting in 1991, a number of NGOs have been established in Albania, such as Amaro Dives, Amaro Drom, Romani Baxt, Alb Rom, Romët për Integrim, Romani Kham, Disutni Albania, Gruaja Rome, Romët e Veriut, Zemra e Nënës, Active Albania etc. Some of them have local character, are fragmented and extended to certain groups or tribes of the Roma community. Despite participating in different political parties, Roma have no representatives in public administration to defend their interests and needs.
RESULTS

Albanian perception for Roma community

What are opinions of other scholars, historians and anthropologists of Albania about this social group? Faik Konica (1990) told about the Albanian cities formation in the Middle Ages and wrote that "despite non-Mohamed communities were also groups of Gypsies divided into 2 categories: nomadic or gypsies originating from India (region of Harigiri, state Katiawan in India), and no itinerant gypsies (magypt) originating from Egypt, Sudan, resident, typically, the periphery of the cities. In "Albanian Race", we have found this discussion: "The gypsies are members of indie race. First called gypsies or even magypt. It seems that as in all Balkan region, also in Albania are distributed through Ottoman Empire. They do not pass nomadic life, but are located in different cities usually live in separate neighborhoods divided by Arbëresh population" (Milaj, 1943). Nathanaili (1975) in her historical study cites the historian researcher Ebiri "Roma and gypsies, ethnography and history of the Gypsies" and writes "Egyptian original, -slip gypsies, Egypt and roman (gypsies) are of Indian origin". Hoxha (1983) writes, "They are not of Egyptian origin, but Indian. They have migrated in westward with large groups at the time of Genghis Khan, even before that time. According to a French historian, the word Gypsy does not come from Egypt, but from the Greek "IFTEST" that apparently could be linked to a locality in Peloponnese ... We in Gjirokastra call them "qifto". But when we say that they have come from northwestern India, let be clear: it comes to 1500 years or 1600 years before, so in ancient times" (Ibid).

As stated above, it appears that there is some confusion in the use of names for gypsies' social group. As to Sami Frashëri, Jakov Milja, Andrew Nathanaili, Costas Ebiri used denomination gypsy, Roma, magypt interchangeably between them as synonyms. Faik Konica denominates them gypsies and uses it as a synonym for naming magypt, gypsy and it is also used as a synonym for Roma. This is a wrong use, because its meaning is unknown. As explained above, this word is synonymous with the word gypsy/magypt. Incorrect use of that is still visible today in the daily life from Arbëresh population for this social group form India. They still use these terms: gypsy, magypt, Roma. Many researchers highlight the origin of Egyptians (magypts) that is from Egypt. We find this highlight at Šami Frashëri, Faik Konica, Alexander Xhuvani Çabej, Costa Ebiri and the Albanian Academy of Sciences in 1980 and dictionary in 1984, relying on popular opinion. As noted above, Enver Hoxha says that their origin is form India. Two scientific distortions are observed in the statements: (1) language, according to him, the word gypsy does not come from Egypt, but from the Greek "iftos"; (2) historical: according to him, the gypsies are of Indian origin. However, we stated above that, denomination magjyp/egyptian comes from the name Egypt, which in Latin and in Greek is aegyptius. Did Enver Hoxha correct those scholars of Albanian language? The word "iftos" as Gjirokastra dialect "qifto", that is a pronunciation of the first word, just reflect the pronunciation of Egypt in Greek language, and not a locality in the Peloponnese. He is inconsistent in timing of Egyptians migration. It proves that the communist policy against Roma and other minority language was not based on accurate information.
Roma community diversity

Albanians have identified Roma and Egyptians as poor groups and its feature has often faded differences between them. Mann wrote that Roma and Egyptians live as communities in poor and isolated neighborhoods by Albanians (Decade of Roma Inclusion, National Action Plan 2009-2015, Tirana, 2009). While Courthiades and Duke emphasize that many Albanians include Roma and Egyptians in the "black hand" category to distinguish them from the "white hand" used to characterize Albanians and other ethnic groups (Courthiade & Duka, 1990). Historically, relations between Albanians and Roma have been cold, but unlike many other European countries, there have been no racial conflicts and persecutions between them.

Different names of Roma community in Albania

In the north of the country, they are known as gabelles, south as arigy and in the southeast (Korca, etc.) as curbat (Marsel Courthiade gives the word "foreigner" as the meaning of gabelles, while the name curbat he says that comes from Turkish word meaning emigration). The Roma community are organized into groups or tribes that can be distinguished from each other by the time and the way of their arrival in Albania, from socio-economic professions, lifestyles and customs, language dialects. They are the meckars, caburgies, (rupars and skodrara), bamilles and courtofs (Courthiade & Duka, 1990; De Soto, 2002; Gedeshi, 2002; Barjaba, 1995), who form a mosaic of diversified groups (Ligegeois J.-P., 1983).

Meckars are the second largest Roma tribe, integrated and centrally located in Albania. They represent over 32% of Roma community and were mostly placed in the area of Myzeqe. Currently, they are located in the districts of Fier, Lushnja, Vlora, Berat, Tirana and Durrës. They are traditionally traded with farming and stockbreeding (Milaj, 1943); a profession that rarely faces Roma community in the Balkans (Ibid). Courthiade and Duke (1990) affirm that there are numerous borrowings of different Albanian words and dialects in their language, indicating that they have been worn for a long time in Albania before being embedded in the actual settlements.

Caburgies (self-styled erli) are the largest tribe and represent about 51% of Roma community ("erli" comes from Turkish and means "local resident"). They migrated from Turkey and Greece to Albania during the exchange of populations in the XX century passed between Turkey and Greece (Hasluck, 1938). Courthiade and Duka (1990) noted that their language is archaic and has more Turkish borrowing than Albanian has. Located mainly in the district of Korça, they then migrated to Pogradec, Elbasan, Tirana, Durrës and Fushë-Kruja. Their traditional professions were the sale of horses, handicrafts and mainly birch work.

Cergars migrated from Montenegro and Serbia and settled in Skodra during the 1920s to escape Yugoslav attacks (Kolsti, 1991). The men were mainly engaged in the sale of horses and women with fallen jokes and fortune-telling (Taho, 2002). Currently they are in Tirana and Durrës.

Bramilles are a small group of Roma who came from Ioannina (Greece) in 1945-1946 with the Cham refugees and are mainly located in the Zinxhiraj of Gjirokastra and in Levan of Fier. They were teabags and made ketchups, pots, profession they
have kept up to our days. While *curtofes* came in Albania during the 1930s from the Monastery of Macedonia and settled in the Fier district. Some of them continue to be half-nomadic even during the socialist period.

The estimation for the Roma population in Albania is subjective. They range from 10,000 to 120,000 people (ERRC, 1997). Compared to other countries in Eastern and Central Europe, such as Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Slovak Republic, Serbia and Montenegro, Hungary and the Czech Republic, the proportion of Roma to the total population in Albania is smaller.

**Lifestyles**

Different Roma communities throughout their migration have undergone many cultural changes due to the cultures they encountered. In fact, their identity is built on the diversity concept and for this reason should be recognized as one of the populations that best represents the European spirit. Since the Middle Ages to this day, they have maintained close relations between family groups, even if these groups are too far apart. Seeing that Roma populations have many differences between each other, we cannot talk about unique Roma culture. Some similar cultural aspects among the different Roma groups are the importance of the family's fashion mode for the cultural and economic organization of Roma groups, the pride and the footprints of the Roma to preserve their diversity, the independence they have for practicing crafts, the lack of territorial roots and the perception that they receive from their families. Strong points for the Roma are the lifestyle community, the capacity to engage many people in small open economy (e.g., group sales), daytime living without much thinking about mobility and solidarity between them, etc. However, often these strong points can also be an obstacle for Roma populations living in societies that are dominated by individualism, capital accumulation, being the same, competition, etc. Globalization, aiming at the unification of cultures, has a negative impact on Roma culture, as it intends to influence rather than affect other local cultures.

**Pilgrimage and sedentary life**

Pilgrimage never has been a feature of the Roma. Their displacement is seen as a feature of frequent migration and not as an instinct for Roma to ever go. This led the Roma to a seasonal work on the labor market. In fact, they have been making some sort of spiritual activity for them, although often they travel for economic reasons. Likewise, during their stay in a country for a long time and for a stable job, the Roma remain "travelers" or "pilgrims" in the spirit. It is true that the Roma are recently in a country, but it is also related to the adaptive feature and their livelihood to resume another journey. Roma consider themselves a nation, but without a compact territory; they have no even claim to have their own territory. In general, they are citizens of the countries, where they are settled, do not seek a separation between them and other citizens, but simply ask for the same rights.

*The first world congress of the Roma took place in London in 1971. This congress emphasized the right of the Roma community to be recognized as a full-fledged people* and adopted a flag, a hymn and a day of the year as the world day of Roma.
CONCLUSIONS
Stereotypes and Discrimination

Roma community represents the most persecuted minority in Europe. Majority peoples feed on Roma a range of prejudices and stereotypes related to the prejudice of their lifestyle, their recognition as dirty, non-social etc. Such situation is quite dangerous especially now that in the conditions of a global economic crisis, there is much less ways to employ Roma, as well as to exercise social assistance or programs. Many local authorities or agencies do not allow Roma to situate in their land or dwellings and force them to stay under bridges or barracks. The Council of Europe fights prejudice against Roma through an awareness campaign called "Dosta!", which means "Enough" in the Roma language. This campaign started in 2006 and is distributed in 12 member states. An interactive webpage has been set up, where television spots, school projects, media information, etc. In addition, all these are initiatives to encourage local communities to have more respect for Roma rights. Targeting the protection of victims of trafficking, rescue and criminal actions against beneficiaries The Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Abuse (2010) is the first international treaty that penalizes sexual abuse against minors. The political movement of the Roma community was experienced in 1960s thanks to organized Roma institutions, international awareness campaigns, collaborations with powerful international organizations. The 2010 events, which led to the expulsion of Roma from Western European countries, forced the General Secretary of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, to take the initiative more focused, more coordinated in multi-dimensional approach (Strasbourg Declaration, 2010). He called on representatives of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Roma community to meet in Strasbourg to condemn widespread discrimination and work to improve the situation. Thus, Strasbourg Declaration encourages the continuation of a series of new initiatives in favor of the Roma.

REFERENCES