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ROMANI PLACES OF CULT (Some Preliminary Questions and Inquiries) *

Summary

Our aim is, by comprehensive empirical analysis of Roma Cult Places to show: 1) that Roma are not just passive cultural community, but also active, self-determined nation; 2) that Roma are example in religious seance for the others how should be prepared to both, receiving and giving, and not only to impose its own credo and cultural model. Moreover, with this research we will show that: 3) that intercultural integration is appropriate to Roma's cultural habitues because syncretic celebration of cult places do not damage their cultural specificities and nation's identity.

*Keywords: Roma, Religion of Roma, Romani Places of Cult,
Tipology of Romani Places of Cult*

ROMSKA KULTNA MESTA (Nekolika preliminarna razmatranja i upitnosti)

Rezime

Namera je da empirijskom obradom romskih kulturnih mesta pokažemo: 1) kako Romi nisu samo pasivna kulturna zajednica već jesu i aktivna, samoopredeljiva nacija; i 2) da su Romi, i u religijskom prostoru, primer drugima kako treba biti spreman i na davanje i na primanje, a ne samo na nametanje svog creda i kulturnog modela. I više od toga, pokažaćemo 3) da romskom kulturnom habitusu odgovara interkulturalna integracija, jer sinkretičko slavljenje kulturnih mesta ne ide na uštrb gubljenja sopstvenih kulturnih specifičnosti i narodnosnog identiteta.

Ključne reči: Romi, religija Roma, romska kulturna mesta, tipologija romskih kulturnih mesta

Introduction

An accidental encounter, which happened two and a half years ago, with an authentic, accurate and picturesque work of respectable Serbian historian and statesman, Milan Đ. Milićević – based on genuine Ottoman legend about religious Turkish girl/woman, who most probably lived in Niš, in the 16. century – stimulated us to widen our study of Romani culture of death with detailed research of one more segment of the cultural treasure of the Roma. That segment is *Romani cult places*, until now traditionally "covered" by ethnological research. Solving this "unfamiliarity" from the urban kernel of Niš – called exclusively Muslim-Christian Romani chancel Zajde Badža – again disclosed layered

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structure of the autochthon, many centuries long Romani experience of living in multiethnic and multireligious societies. Sociological "nerve" did not stand still, so we very fast from "scratching" the surface reached the scrupulous research of their cultural space. Initial ideas were transfused into the project "*Romani Places of Cult and Culture of Death*" (2002-2005)¹, which we are undertaking for the program ROMA CULTURE IN CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPE (OSI, Budapest).

Until now, besides Zajde Badža, we have registered the following Romani places of cult: Deruni Baba (place of cult which is not active any more) and the Roman Catholic Church in Niš; the Kadija's Cross, the Mileta's church and the Pear Tree /Knjaževac/, Savićevac and Orljan's stone /Prokuplje/.

In this article, we will present some introductory information about places of cult in Knjaževac.

Mileta's church in Žlna (Knjaževac)

This is old and famous site of a former church in the valley of the Žlna River, seven kilometers south from Knjaževac. A legends says that this Cristian Orthodox temple, dedicated to St. Lazar (Lazarica), was built around 1850, by Mileta Živadinović, local inhabitant who was famous for his supernatural skills of foretelling, described by him as a gift of God. According to the manifest, left by St. Archangel Mihailo himself, granddad Mileta, on the estate of former Ottoman landowner, dug little church, which was named after him. Until the Second World War, the church was regularly visited by believers, after which began its gradual dying. Twenty years ago, with the effort and volunteer benefaction given by the local population, the church was renovated; since then it has been visited on every St. Lazar Day by believers and majority population from Knjaževac and other nearby towns.

However, the data concerning whether and when Roma visit the church are contradictory. According to the stand of a lively old man, who has been working on the care of the Church for the last thirty years, the Church is visited exclusively by the Roma from Knjaževac; although they did not take part in its renovation, Roma come especially on the Good Friday before Easter and a bit less with other Orthodox believers on the Lazar's Saturday. The owner of the parcel bordering the church, who is not a Rom and who lives in the neighborhood of the Romani district, claims that local Romani population has neither something to do with the tradition of visiting the Žlna's Orthodox temple, nor with its putting up. He says that only on the Day of St. Anastas Roma ritually donate – for them sacred – *pear tree* with different knitted parts, such as gloves, socks and little baskets. The story told by the Roma is completely different. They proudly confirm their role in the revitalization of the ritual place and the obligation to sacrifice poultry, light candles and give to the church little knitted baskets, filled with handicrafts, such as gloves and socks on every 31st of January, the Day of Aunt ("Bibijako Đive").

It is still unclear if the Roma took part in the restoration during seventies, as well as what is the exact date of their mass visit to the Mileta's Church in Žlna. We also do not know if the non-Rom neighbor made a mistake and actually talked about St. Atanas (31st of January), the day celebrated by big number of Roma in Serbia and which supported the claims of the local Romani population from Knjaževac.²

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² Stojanović, Z. (2002), Romska kulna mesta (Miletina crkva u Knjaževcu)/Romani places of cult – Mileta's

The "Pear Tree" near Knjaževac

We come across the real meaning of the pear tree in the Romani celebrations through the place of cult "Pear Tree" near Knjaževac. Namely, on the big Romani celebration "Bibijako Đive" (The Day of Aunt/Bibija), on the 31st of January, Orthodox Roma from Knjaževac, after finishing the preparatory operations, visit the holy pear tree, situated on the road to Niš, near the restaurant "Barka", on the left side to direction of Niš, one kilometer from the Gypsy *mahala*.

According to the believes of Roma, "Aunt" is an imaginary, miniature woman, of a doll size, with long, black hair, who protects Roma from evil forces and black magic. Because of her dimensions, Roma give her home made clothes (dresses, skirts, socks), food (fresh, but not-fat poultry, rice, cereals and bread), beverages, candles and money. In the noon, all Romani families gather and go, followed by the music, to visit the holy tree. "Baker" – a person who is that year given the responsibility of organizing the celebration – dedicates the first candle to "aunt"; then, he lights one candle for each family member, whereas the last candle is dedicated to the "aunt's children". They leave some food, beverages and money, and hang clothes on the tree. After that gathered Romani families perform described activities. After the "Baker" for the next year is selected, the celebration is continued in the nearby restaurant, where Roma organize Romani "Ball" and Beauty Contest. Following the celebration, the leftover food is not thrown away, but left outdoors.³

The "Kadija's Cross" near Knjaževac

The third cult place in Knjaževac has turbulent historical background and is today visited by both non-Roma and Roma. That is sandy monument in shape of a cross, situated at the very entrance in the town, from direction of Niš, not far from the Romani district Gypsy *mahala*. It was built in 1853, on the previous estate of an Ottoman *qadi/kadija* (by whom is named after), to glorify dead Serbian soldiers in Serbian-Ottoman wars; it has been regularly visited on the Day of Village's Religious Procession, which is on the second day of the Pentecost.

Golgotha of this cross starts during the Second World War, when it was partially destroyed during bombing, and continues after the War with ideological fear of the town management during the Socialism. Because of the building of factory complex, the Cross finished in the nearby stream, while hundred years old oaks ("trees of peace") were cut down. Led by the idea that one should not be playing with sanctities, some local people took it out from the stream and rebuilt it not far from the primary location. This caused another reaction, this time of county officials – the Cross ended, first in the church of St. Đorđe, and then, because of restoration, it was taken to the National Museum in Kruševac. Some thirty meters from the primary location, the Kadija's Cross was again put up in 1995, and this time it was dedicated to St. Unmercenary Physicians, Kozmo and Damjan.

Today, the described Cross is the sanctity of all people of Knjaževac, just as it used to be a century ago. The Roma actively participated in its building, preservation and

Chruch in Knjaževac/, In: Đorđević, D. B. and M. Filipović, *Sociologija romskog identiteta (Sociology of Romani Identity)* (str. 181-185), KSS/Cmyk, Niš.

³ Živković, M. (2002), *Romska kulna mesta – Kruška /Romani places of cult – The Pear Tree/*, In: Đorđević, D. B. and M. Filipović, *Sociologija romskog identiteta (Sociology of Roma Identity)* (pp. 187-188), KSS/Cmyk, Niš.

restoration, but, as they admit, it is not their exclusive right. The Cross is visited on big religious celebrations, dirges, and on the Day of St. Unmercenary Physicians, Kozmo and Damjan; the usual presents are being left (T-shirts, towels, socks, money).⁴

* * *

The following is the typology of places of cult, which we used during our research: (A) *places of cult visited exclusively by the Roma*; (B) *places of cult, visited by both Roma and other peoples*; and, (C) *sacral temples, as Romani cult places*.

String of three pearls from the Knjaževac region represents all of the above-mentioned types. Thus, the *Pear Tree*, situated right by the magistral road Niš- Knjaževac, could be treated like exclusive Romani place of cult; the *Kadija's Cross* is equally visited on the Day of St. Unmercenary Physicians, Kozmo and Damjan by both majority and minority population; while the *Mileta's Church* keeps its gates open for expressing religious feelings of all Roma in the local surrounding.

Comparing them with the Niš's Zajde Badža, we find some similarities, as well as differences:

1. Zajde Badža, the Pear Tree and the Kadija's Cross are authentic "religious temples" on the open;
2. Available data and informers' reports witness century long praxis of paying collective visits to all of them; the longest is tradition of the Niš's cult place;
3. While Zajde Badža, as the place of cult, built to glorify Turkish saint, is the gathering point not only of Roma from Niš but also Roma from nearby Serbian towns, the other places of cult are visited exclusively by the Orthodox Roma from Knjaževac;
4. The intensity of visits is different: regular, weekly visits (Zajde Badža), on the day dedicated to the Romani protector Bibija (the Pear Tree), or a couple of times – but mandatory on the day of sanctification of the place and big Orthodox celebrations (the Kadija's Cross and contradictory claims about the Mileta's Church).

Repeated and newly observed characteristics of the ritual behavior incite to broaden typology of cult places, that is, to introducing some subtypes:

(A) What is the proportion between places of cult which Roma visit only on one day, that is, on the clearly determined day in the year (for example, Bibija) and those which are visited couple of times per year (for example, Zajde Badža, regularly on Thursdays but also on some other days, officially determined by the church in the church calendar)?

(B) Do Roma always visit and perform rituals around the place of cult at the same time when the majority population does it or do they bring gifts on the days when majority population do not?

(C) Are sacral temples in the urban areas more 'popular' than those in the provinces?

Of course, we can answer these questions only by widening our empirical data, which will be intensively gathered in the following period (2002-2005)

⁴Randelović, I. (2002), Romska kulna mesta – Kadijski krst u Knjaževcu /Romani places of cult – the Kadija's Cross in Knjaževac, In: Đorđević, D. B. and M. Filipović, *Sociologija romskog identiteta (Sociology of Roma Identity)* (pp. 189-192), KSS/Cmyk, Niš.

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