

THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS OF ROMA IN SERBIAN SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION*

Introduction

The study of religion, religiosity and religious customs of Roma is significant for at least two reasons, namely, the Roma religious culture is an important segment of the unique Roma culture. In addition, their emancipation in the religious-ecclesiastical domain, besides the socio-economic and political one, is an essential prerequisite for the overall emancipation of the Roma people. Yet, the domestic sociology of religion has failed to show any substantial interest in the Roma religious life. Regarding its attempts to modernize, intensify and deepen the theoretical and empirical explorations of the Roma “religious musicality” a prominent place is taken by *The Romology School of Niš*.¹

The paper gives a short survey of the published empirical research undertakings in the Serbian sociology of religion, that is, in *The Romology School of Niš* as well as the most important scientific papers derived from them; it also makes an attempt to systematize different fields of research along with enlisting the most representative books, anthologies and authors’ contributions dedicated to the study of Roma religiosity. To conclude, the paper points to the themes of the Roma religious culture whose organized surveillance, in the future, will lead to the constitution of the *sociology of religion of Roma religious life*.

Empirical Research of *The Romology School of Niš*

Unlike other scientific centers in Serbia and ex-Yugoslav countries, as well as in other Balkan countries, which have shown interest in the study of Roma, the RSN has been distinguished from the very outset by the empirical approach to the study of Roma. Almost all projects were supported by foreign institutions and awarded in an international contest (*A Scheme for Supporting a Research*, Prague; *A Programme of Romani Culture of the Open Institute*, Budapest; *The Council for Global Security*, Washington; *The Italian Consortium for Solidarity*, Italy; *Arts and Culture Network Program*, Budapest...).

More significant projects are the following:

- Rites Connected to the Principal Religious Holidays of Roma in Niš (1996) (Ђуровић и Ђорђевић 1996),
- Socio-cultural Adaptation of Roma in Serbia in the Transition Process – Integration, Assimilation or Segregation? (1998 – 2000) (Ђорђевић 2001a),
- Classical Faith and Country Cemeteries of Ortodox Roma (1999) (Ђорђевић и Тодоровић 1999; Todorović and Ђорђевић 2001),
- Roma and “Way Out” (2000) (Ђорђевић 2001b),
- Religious Life of Ortodox and Muslim Roma in Western-southeast Serbia (2000-2002) (Todorović 2002; Ђорђевић и Todorović 2002),

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¹ A comprehensive survey of the origin, history and papers done by *The Romology School of Niš* in Todorović 2006, 2008b, and Ђорђевић 2006.

- Zajde Badža – A Romani Cult Place in Niš (2001) (Đorđević und Todorović 2008),
- Roma between Serbs and Albanians in Bujanovac and Preševo (Political and Cultural Causes of Conflicts) (2001-2002) (Đorđević, Živković and Jovanović 2004; Đorđević and M. Filipović 2004b),
- Roma from Grejač (2000-2001) (Стajiћ 2001),
- Activities Aimed at the Increasing of Romani Income in South Serbia (Bujanovac, Vranje, Leskovac) (2001-2002) (Đorđević, Živković and Todorović 2002a, 2002b),
- Prejudices and the Economic Culture of Roma (2002-2003) (Cvetković 2003),
- Romani Cult Places and Culture of Death (2002-2005) (Todorović 2005; Đorđević 2005),
- Roma as a Crossborder and a Crosscultural Group (2003-2005) (Đorđević, Todorović and Milošević 2004; Đorđević i Filipović; Тодоровић 2007б),
- The Culture of Peace and Roma in the Balkans (Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria) (2006-2010) (Đorđević and Filipović 2004a),
- Romani Talents of Southeast Serbia (2006-2007) (Đorđević 2007a, 2008; Тодоровић 2008a);
- Tekkias, Tarikats and Sheiks of Niš Romas (2007-2008) (Đorđević and Todorović 2007) and
- Integration of the Children of the Dislodged Kosovo Romas into the Educational System (2008).

FIELDS OF STUDY

Religious-Confessional Panorama

The data about religious (current attachment to religion and church) and confessional self-identification (affiliation to some faith) as forms of manifestation of the religious consciousness represent the initial framework for identifying the dispersion of the classical religiosity in numerous research studies. Though the Romas are an autochthonous ethnic minority in Serbia sharing the general historical fate with the majority people, the Serbs have manifested what can be regarded as “embarrassing ignorance” of the Roma religious-confessional being. This refers to any substantial knowledge about its dispersion, the ways of its formation, its major constituent factors, or any answer to the question whether, in this process, the Roma tend more to receive or to give cultural traits, etc. In the background there is an implied assumption that the Romas accept the manifest religions, firstly, out of the necessity, both formally and as mimicry, while recalling their ancient homeland faith; when this happens, they tend to mix Christianity and Islam which very often ends in their strange interweaving. It tends to be forgotten, however, that, from the cultural standpoint, this intermingling does not represent a drawback but a gain in itself, especially with respect to the intercultural practice in multiethnic and multireligious societies.

Aware that it takes only one step from ignorance to prejudice, that numerous members of the majority people have already assumed biased attitudes towards Roma that even lead some of them to xenophobia and others to open racism, the partakers of *The Romology School of Niš* have extensively reported in their papers the basic traits of the Roma culture. They have informed us about the past, the present and the future of the Roman at the local (Trajković 1991; Jašić 2001; Стajiћ 2001) and the republic level (Đorđević 2003b), while especially paying attention to the ritual celebration of two religious-ethnic holidays: *Vasuljica* (January 14, Saint

Vasilije) and *Đurđevdan* (May 6, St. George's Day). Thus a necessary turn from exclusively ethnological considerations of the Roma religious-custom tradition has been made towards sociological questioning of the current religious life of the Romas. It has been found out that these are traditionally accepted celebrations, with a weak religious background yet with an expressed tendency to confirm the patriarchal authority and to preserve firm and stable family relations (Ђуровић и Ђорђевић 1996). The observed shifts in the religious-ecclesiastical field and the most recent knowledge about the complexity of the Roma national, cultural and religious identity lead the researchers to the conclusion that the Romas are on their way from a forgotten to a rising minority (Đorđević 2004a).

Majority and Minority Religions and Romas

A dispute on the relationship among religions and among the religious confessions as well as the state of the minority religions and the religions of the minorities, with a special reference to the religious life of Romas, is an impermissibly marginalized problem in the domestic and Balkan sociology of religion and religiology. Following the sociological credo, namely, that the undertaking of concrete steps for achieving their equality in the religious-ecclesiastical sphere is not possible without giving an answer to the question regarding the attitude taken by the majority religious population towards the Roma religious minority and religious discrimination towards Roma, the romologists of Niš, on the basis of numerous published socio-empirical research projects, in their papers, give their commentaries on the attitudes of the majority Serbian population (Đorđević i Todorović 2001) as well as Hungarians and Muslims, ethnic minorities and, at the same time, religious majorities (Filipović 2003) and Romas as conventional believers.

A special attention is paid to learning about the attitudes taken by the Orthodox, Islam, Catholic and Protestant Church authorities and the outstanding Roma elite about Romas as believers. By using the method of more profound interviews, the answers sought for refer to whether they can be "good" church believers and whether their behavior in the religious field can be treated as a good example of interculturalist practice in multiethnic and multireligious societies (Живковић, Тодоровић, Јовановић и Ђорђевић 2001). There has been some critical questioning of the dominant practice of the manifest religion to approach with some hesitation a genuine involvement of the believing Romas thus neglecting the fact that they can be good believers only if they are accepted, approached and treated equally as the rest of the congregation. At the same time, the traditional churches are directed towards spreading, among their own members, the idea of religious co-existence with minority believers of the same or of different religions and towards carrying out concrete actions in achieving this goal (Todorović 2007a). Advancement in the Roma religious culture is taken to be, though not so big in size, a Roma-Serbian-English glossary of religious words and expressions (Јовановић 2001).

The analyses of the phenomena of religion, confession, confessional affiliation, monoconfessional mentality, the religion of choice, minority faith, faith of minority, minority religious confession and Protestantization of Romas have clarified, in detail, the concept of *religious minorism* (Đorđević 2003a) while pointing to the Romas who are, from many different perspectives, in a minority position and whose example best reflects the position of the minority faiths (Đorđević 2002). The basic idea to plead for is religious tolerance as a model of tolerance in general and intercultural practice in the society.

Classical Religiosity

In the sociology of religion, the ecclesiastical, conventional, that is, classical religiosity is defined as a synthesis of religious consciousness and religious behavior and association. Any debate on the classical Roma religiosity implies answering to the questions regarding the ways in which they *confessionally identify themselves*, whether they are “pure” Christians, Muslims or pagans, or they are a combination of the first and the second, or a mixture of the third with the first two ones, or if they are allied to the first or to the second faith, that is, whether they are, as Christians, Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestants, that is, as Muslims, Sunnites or Shiites? This set of questions is accompanied with those related to the regularity of practicing piety in religious temples, holiday observances, religious rituals, faith in the divine origin of the world and afterlife, etc. Many significant issues related to the religious Roma culture are also taken up (Đorđević 2003c).

It has been stated that the Serbian Romas are mostly Orthodox Christians and Sunnite Muslims; the Roman Catholic are lagging behind whereas the Protestant Romas are advancing in number. At present there is a thin layer of those who regularly and in the prescribed way carry out the customs and perform the rites; the prevailing ones are so-called seasonal believers or believers of the four rites with whom the secularization of the religious behavior is prominent. Fasting and in a wider range the religious behaviors that require denials, effort and zeal, that is, prayer and fasting, church attendance, liturgy and confession, are being abandoned. This implies the reduction in number or even an atrophy of religious customs and rituals, weakening of frequency and intensity as well as allotting smaller importance to their role and efficiency (Đorđević 2002b). The interpretation of the empirical material has confirmed the hypothesis stating that the Romas are on the way to becoming good believers of the classical Christian Orthodox religiosity, that is, that they are approaching the classical model of the Roman Orthodox believers: they get baptized, they get married in the church, they celebrate their patron saint's day and are buried with the religious service. The Roma Muslims follow their Christian compatriots in every single aspect: they circumcise their children, they celebrate Ramadan and Kurban Bayrami and they bury their dead following the Islam funeral observances and, above all, they are on their way to becoming good traditional members of the Islam religious community. At the same time, none of them do annul or forget their old cultural determinants; instead, they are integrated for the sake of their own and the wider social community (Đorđević 2001c). On the basis of the responses obtained from the examinees from southeast and southwest Serbia, the regional differences have also been explored regarding the development of the religious consciousness of the Muslim Romas comparing to the Orthodox ones; this is done on the basis of quantitative/qualitative presence or absence of the usual elements of the religious dogmatic set (Đorđević i Todorović 2002). The influence of the ethnic and religious factors upon the social distance towards Romas in Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia has also been explored. While in the case of the national and confessional distinctions of the examinees the statistic data tend to assign them sometimes greater and sometimes smaller importance, in the religious sphere, religiosity does not reveal itself as a discriminating factor of the social distance from the Romas in the given three Balkan countries (Тодоровић 2007б).

Cult Places

In addition to emphasizing the theoretical importance of the studies of the cult places as an important factor of the religious manifestation of a nation, the Serbian sociologists of religion have offered to the public their own findings collected in

field work as well as two original typologies of the Roma cult places. The first typology assumes the existence of active Roma cult places that are still functioning and of extinct Roma cult places that are defunct. The other typology makes a distinction between the cult places exclusively attended by Romas, those attended by Romas together with other nations and sacral temples as cult places for Romas' gatherings (Đorđević 2003d).

The confessional complexity of the Roma identity is best discerned by analyzing concrete cases from a rich material legacy. In the history of Niš an exclusive position is taken by Zahide-badji as a cult place of Niš Romas. It represents a transformation of the Ottoman legend (lore) about Zahide-badji, probably a historical figure mentioned by the travel writer Evliya Celebi in the seventeenth century that was later sacralized by Niš Turks as reported on by Felix Kanitz and Milan Đ. Milićević. Once the Turks had left, the Romas of Niš accepted, reworked and adopted both the lore and the places near the so-called Belgrade Gate on Niš Fortress where the *turbe* or headstone used to be, thus creating for themselves a cult place attended by both the Muslim and Orthodox Romas (Đorđević 2005a; Đorđević and Todorović 2008). On the basis of the talks with some old Romas and the site research, according to the methodology adopted in advance, ten cult places from the counties of Toplički, Niški, Pčinjski and Zaječarski in Serbia have been treated in detail (Saitović-Lukin 2003; Todorović 2003; Đorđević 2005a).

Cemeteries

A new chapter has also started in the romological literature and the foundations have been laid for socio-empirical exploration of the *phenomenon of death, ways of burial (funeral observances), cult of the grave and types of cemeteries with Romas*. Led by the assumption that the place for Roma burial is a peculiar test of ethnic and religious tolerance, a *typology of Roma-Orthodox country cemeteries* has been set up on the territory of Niš Municipality just as the hypothesis is tested by which, for Romas, their "eternal home" is built on a) their own, so-called Roma cemetery which is physically separated from so-called Serbian one, b) their own, so-called Roma cemetery which is physically connected to so-called Serbian one, c) so-called Serbian cemetery mixed with that of other peoples and d) some other cemetery, outside the place of residence (Ђорђевић и Тодоровић, 1999; Todorović and Đorđević 2001; Đorđević 2004b). The Romas have always been buried on a separate terrain, even separate from their residence site for at least three reasons: a) severe segregation and stigmatization of the majority environment, b) internal distinctions of their own culture and the culture of death, and c) turbulent social-historical developments. Except for the burials outside their place of living (type „d“), the other types of cemeteries ("a," "b" and "c") are quite legitimate and desirable. The empirical evidence is expanded with an analysis of twenty-nine examples of the Roma urban and rural burials from the geographic-cultural space of southeast Serbia (Đorđević 2005a; Đorđević and Todorović 2006).

Burial and Death Rites

Death can be regarded as a peculiar social event that brings into focus a multitude of group and social phenomena, *a genuine image of the concrete community and culture that reveals to us a set of, for instance, economic and class, layer and status, custom and religious, ethnic and racial relations* (Ђорђевић и Тодоровић 1999:3). All which is related to it such as pre-death, death and post-death observances, make up a specific *culture of death*. How does the Roma culture of death fit into the Serbian one, that is, whether the latter, since more widely spread, attracts, acce-

pts and assimilates or refuses and excludes the former one? That is another set of issues that have been the topic of the analyses of pre-death, death and post-death observances.

The *Procedure for Interviewing Older Roma Men and Women about Pre-death, Death and Post-death Rites* is prepared marking the beginning of a very detailed description of the observances related to the death of the Muslim and Orthodox Romas from southeast Serbia. These are the customs practiced before death, immediately after death, preparations for burial and the very act of burial as well as behavior after the last farewell to the diseased on the cemetery. The customs are presented comparatively: in the same way they have been practiced from times immemorial and in the way the Romas practice them today (Osmani 2003; Vučković 2003; Тодоровић 2004b). The efforts finally led to a synthetic study in English and in Roma comprising eleven most representative sayings of older Roma men and women (each in every of 28 municipalities in 6 counties of southeast Serbia) (Todorović 2005). In some answers there is an open admission that some of the given customs have remained unaltered despite the passage of time, that some of them have necessarily undergone partial transformations and that the remaining ones do represent a fresh creation of the youngest generations.

Conversion

The representatives of the Serbian sociology of religion, that is, of *The Romology School of Niš* have taken an active participation in resolving the uncertainties of the domestic sociology of religion regarding the question of what is today implied by missionary activity or evangelization, by conversion or by proselytism (taking over believers) as well as different interpretations of these concepts by the representatives of the majority and minority religions (Todorović 2004a; Тодоровић и Ђорђевић 2004).

The focus is also on the position and behavior of the Romas in the process of missionizing, conversion and proselytism. Due to their religious amorphousness, that is, unfoundedness in religion and confession, the Romas in general represent a suitable material on the highway of conversion. The conversion process takes place less a) towards changing the “grandfather’s” one and embracing a new one (except for Muslim Romas) and more b) towards altering the confessional branch, as a rule, with the Romas Orthodox and Roman Catholics. The Muslim Romas convert to all the three Christian confessions, while the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Romas turn into Protestants (Todorović 2002; Ђорђевић 2004c). It is also warned that the Roma conversion, first into small religious communities, would lead to their emancipation through easily noticeable changes in the behavior of the Romas who have converted into Protestantism (reduction of petty crime elements, alcoholism, drug addiction, while the level of hygienic habits is rising) but that, yet, it can have an effect upon the changes of the Roma identity. Undoubtedly, the journey of conversion has started while the Roma Orthodox and Muslims are the most numerous travelers seeking to find replacement for the lost splendor of their “authentic faith”.

Protestantization

Imitating the pattern of dispersion in the European and, more specifically, other Balkan countries, the Protestant religious communities in Serbia devote special attention to ethnic and religious minorities as well as, in its southeast regions, to Romas. The assumption is put forward about three ways of Protestantization; these are: self-reproduction of believers, conversion and taking-over of believers from the majority religions and missionizing, conversion and taking-over from the treasury of

ethnic and religious minorities. In accordance with such prognoses, the Romas are regarded as a *religious and confessional reservoir* of Protestantization since they are liable to missionizing, that is, evangelization and to conversion and taking-over, that is, proselytism (Đorđević 2005a).

While taking advantage of the lack of pastoral care on the part of the majority religious communities for Romas, they gradually take up the vacancy and start meeting the need for diverse social services (free literature and foreign language courses, organized travels abroad, employment, charity activities, and the like) making optimal use of an abundant financial support from its own headquarters and the benefits of the new technologies and mass media. Their enrollment into the Protestant churches has brought to the Romas many of the things they are otherwise deprived of in Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity and Islam, more precisely, dignity and respect, care and provisions, hope and perspective. These churches contribute to the improvement of the life quality of those of their members who are of Roma nationality as well as to their enlightenment and further improvement of their social status. The traditional and centuries-old established Christian (Orthodox/Roman Catholic)/Islam religious-confessional being of the Roma is displaced by a successful inflow of the third branch of Christianity (Đorđević 2004a, 2004e). Also, noted is the presence of the purely Roma Protestant churches such as, for instance, "The Community of Romas" or Roma evangelical community which has, due to its increase in number, got separated from its mother church or the Spiritual Center *Svetlo* (or Light) from Leskovac (Kurtić 2003).

It is also thought that there is no more urgent task for the sociologists of religion than to explore the Protestantization of Romas since this phenomenon is currently going on, it is "here and now," it gets institutionalized and routinized. There is no more gainful task for the sociologists of religion than to study Roma Protestantization since the phenomenon is so complex, far-reaching and decisive that it itself gathers together all that the modern sociology of religion has to deal with. In addition to finding answers to what Protestantization really is – whether evangelization, conversion or proselytism, the answer to look for is related to those groups of factors that are of decisive influence for further Romanization of Protestantism. It seems that the myriad reasons can be systematized into four groups: *socio-economic, theological, cultural and political*; they can be all put under the *theory of rational choice* (Ђорђевић 2007б).

Islam and Romas

In our regions the greatest mystery is that of the "home" *Islam and Islam population*. We do lack research projects for the sake of gaining a better insight into the prevailing Sunnite as well as rare manifestations of the Shiite Islam. In Serbia the elements of Shiite Islam can only be found in the dervish orders mostly located in Kosovo and Metohija. When it comes to the state of Serbia without this province, the inflow of this branch of Islam goes through "Roma" tekias, tarikats and sheiks dispersed all over the territory from Niš to the far south of Serbia. Increasing is the number of Muslim Romas among the Balkan dervishes which is in accordance with the process emerging in the second half of the twentieth century, through the process of intensive re-activation and enlivening of the Suffi orders and attracting new converts and followers into the zone of mystical Islam.

In southeast Serbia, as well as in Niš as its center, comparing to the rest of the state, there are many Roma members of Islam. More precisely, there are many Roma Muslims by their confessional origin who, however, hardly remember that their elders were active members of the Islam community. Yet, there are such Ro-

mas, indeed an impressive minority, who have remained loyal to “the tradition of their fathers and forefathers.” Among them are dervishes who are, surely, the most interesting party from the sociological perspective. That is why, at first in a very careful manner, actions have been taken to prepare a documentary report on the state of two Roma tekias in Niš (Đorđević and Todorović 2007). The dispute springing from it and a notable interest of the scientific community have urged the domestic sociologists of religion to completely investigate the whole dervish tradition in Niš Roma *mahalas* thus giving modest contribution to the multiplication of the studies of the heterodox Islam orders in the Balkans. As the first paper written in the languages of the Romas published in a university journal, it also represents a notable contribution written by the more respected and educated Serbian Roma about the tekia as a cult place of Preševo Muslim Romas completed by a proposal for Roma alphabet (Osmani 2008).

Closely connected with the initiated discussions of “European Islam” and „Balkan Islam” as well as the position and activities of the Islam community in Serbia and the attention they are paying to the Muslim Romas as believers (Ђорђевић, Тодоровић и Митровић 2007) is an initiated dispute about the social lack of career prospects as a source of frustration for the Roma followers of Islam as well as the problem-viewing of the relationship between the Romas and various currents of religious radicalism within the mainstream of the Balkan Islam. To the predictions put forward by the Bulgarian intellectuals stating how it may happen that in the near future three ethnic groups, namely Bulgarian Turks, Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) and *Romas of Islam religious confession* become a “reservoir” of the radical Islam fundamentalism, is set off by empirical facts about tolerance between the majority population and the Balkan Romas that moves them away from the qualifications for religious fanaticism (Тодорович и Джорджевич 2005).

Conclusion

Relying on the program text put forward by Dragoljub B. Đorđević (2007c), we tend to assess the theoretical and empirical contribution of the Serbian sociology of religion, more precisely, of a group of researchers of *The Romology School of Niš* regarding its multiple increase of our knowledge about the religious culture of Romas. Above all, they have, in their critical dispute with the so far predominantly ethnological insights, promoted a far more modern approach to the Roma religious customs, while especially insisting on the classical, conventional, that is, church religiosity. They have lunched a discussion about important manifestations of the Roma religious life such as:

1. Position of Romas within the traditional, well-known religions,
2. Increasingly massive Romas’ liability to the influence of diverse small Protestant religious communities that enrich a religious panorama of the Balkan societies, and,
3. Research of the Roma cultural legacy (Roma culture of death, cult places, etc.)

The so far individual commitment of the researchers of *The Romology School of Niš* should grow, in the near future, into academically organized romological studies at some of Niš University departments. The final establishment of the domestic *sociology of religion of Roma religious life* will be further supported by patient collection, classification and systematization of the data about numerous uncertainties of Roma religious life such as:

1. Observing the respect for the totality of Roma believers by both the clergy and believers of the majority religious confessional systems,

2. Effect of further layering of the confessional Roma being on the foundation of a firm national and cultural identity,
3. Internal and external religious (un)tolerance among Romas, members of the majority religions,
4. Changes in the attitudes of the Romas as members of the majority religions towards the Romas in the minority religious communities,
5. Effects of Protestantization on the changes in the attitudes of the basic Roma cultural principle towards the issue whether it is more important to “have” or to “be”,
6. Effects of Protestantization on the changes of an essential part of the Roma cultural identity in the sense of the traditional division into “our, Roma” and “their world or Gadja’s world” growing into an opposition between the “world of the believers” made up of Romas and Gadjas and the “world of the unbelievers” which is again made up of Romas and non-Romas,
7. Making subtle distinctions between “religious combining” and “syncretism” using the Roma example,
8. Reconstruction of the Roma popular religion, and
9. Indications for the constitution of the so-called Roma Church.

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