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MYTH AS PROCESS

“We used to have a great king, a Rom. He was our prince. He was our king. The Gypsies used to live all together at that time in one place, in one beautiful country. The name of that country was Sind. There was much happiness, much joy there. The name of our chief was Mar Amengo Dep. He had two brothers. The name of one was Romano, the name of the other was Singan. That was good, but then there was a big war there. The Moslems caused the war. They made ashes and dust of the Gypsy country. All the Gypsies fled together from their own land. They began to wander as poor men in other countries, in other lands. At that time the three brothers took their followers and moved off, they marched along many roads. Some went to Arabia, some went to Byzantium, some went to Armenia.” (Kenrick and Puxon 1972: 13)

This legend, which has appeared many times in various publications, was recorded in the town of Shumen, Bulgaria in the 1960s by Donald Kenrick as told by a local Rom Ali Tchaushev. It is a very good illustration of the complex nature and modern functioning of Gypsy folklore on the Balkans. Gypsy folklore on the Balkans is not a dead or stagnant heritage, merely revered and reproduced as a symbol of ethno-cultural tradition; it is a living and dynamic system in constant development, with various functions, including the function of historical knowledge about the community, such as the legend cited above.

Before we begin, we have to say that history and folklore traditions have a special place in the life of Balkan nations, where the processes of ethno-national development began later than Western Europe, in the nineteenth century, and are still active now. History here is not so much a science as part of the national mythology. Each nation on the Balkans has its own historical mythology dating back from most ancient times (most often from the cradle of world civilisation), which reveals its glorious historical past. It is constantly resurrected and projected in different guises in modern times, especially in crisis situations. In the Balkans nations live more closed lives – closed within the

patterns and inferiority complexes of their historical past rather than open to the problems of the present and the perspective of the future. Folklore traditions are important to the Balkan nations because they are an integral part of historical neo-mythology, which often makes use of their substance and arguments to explain contemporary problems.

Gypsies in the Balkans are no particular exception to this situation; they do not live in a world to themselves. Due to their complex historical destiny they have always been an indelible part of the surrounding macrosociety. The etiological legends (i.e. legends about the origin) are a particularly well-developed and diverse genre, and the issue of their origin as a people is a primary question whose answer is sought on the level of folklore. We should not forget that unlike the other Balkan nations, Gypsies do not have official and institutionalised science and education, which is why the answers to this question have remained on this level for centuries.

Gypsy folklore, however, is not a completely closed, self-sufficient and self-developing system. It is strongly influenced by the 'official' culture of the macrosociety where Gypsies live, and respectively by the overall cultural and historical context on the Balkans. In particular, Gypsy etiological legends express the extremely complicated reflections between folklore and 'official' culture, which can either make use of typically archaic folklore plots, forms and approaches, joining them together with the respected and established religious images or "prove" them by the achievements of modern 'scientific' knowledge.

Probably the most archaic are the roots of the etiological legends explaining the origin of Gypsies from a brother and a sister. In some variants the names of the brother and sister are Tchín and Genia, (Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 19-21), which is a naive etymology of the Turkish word "Tchingene", meaning Gypsies. Somewhat related is the legend about a boy and a girl saved respectively by St. George and St. Vassil (or Bango Vassil, i.e. Vassil the lame one) when all Roma were threatened with annihilation. This explains why these are the most revered saints by the Roma today. (Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 103) However, even these legends seek to prove their truth value from 'outside', outside the Romani community, in the spirit of the religious tradition of the macrosociety, whether Christian or a Muslim (or, as often, a combination of both). That is why the Biblical images of Abraham, king Namrut, Archangels Michael and Gebrail, St. George and St. Vassil appear in them.

A very frequent phenomenon in many legends is the relation between the origin and scattering of the Gypsies around the world with their mythical leaders and the “lost kingdom” theme located in ancient Biblical Egypt. Popular among Balkan Roma is the cycle of legends about the Gypsy “king Pharaon” (Phiraon, Phiraun, Pheravin, etc.). (Djordjević 1933: 122-123; Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 22-31, 49-50) Most variants of these legends were recorded in the first half of our century, but quite a few of them are still popular today. They tell about the kingdom of the Gypsies in Egypt, retell the story of Moses (or Misai), describe the popular Biblical theme about the parting of the sea, the escape of the Jews and the drowning of the soldiers of the Egyptian king. Sometimes these legends mention St. Vassil, who saved the Gypsies with the help of some geese. This explains the celebration of Vasilyovden (Vasilitsa, i.e. the day of Vassil – the Romani New Year) with roast geese honouring the saviour goose. (Djordjević 1933: 126-127; Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 49-50)

The “Egyptian” cycle of legends has complex relations with the development of the social and political thinking of the Gypsies. The very idea of connecting the origin of Gypsies with Egypt was established on the Balkans as early as XIII-XIV c. when various Byzantine sources divided with or united the two appellations “Tsigani” and “Egyptians”. (Marushiakova and Popov 2001) When they first came to Western Europe the Gypsies presented themselves as newcomers from Little Egypt. This idea persisted among Roma on the Balkans until later, during the times of the Ottoman Empire, when in one of his descriptions of the Gypsies in the region of Nish in 1740 Johan Kampelen noted that they were proud of their Egyptian roots. (Ionov, 1983: 128-129)

The nineteenth century saw a new stage in the development of Gypsy historical awareness on the Balkans. Along with typical folklore forms enhanced by the authority of the Bible, attempts were made to explain the Egyptian origin of Gypsies with ‘scientific’ arguments and thus to discuss their social emancipation problems. In 1866 Petko Ratchev Slaveikov, a famous Bulgarian poet and publicist, published his article “The Gypsies” in the “Gayda” newspaper, published in Istanbul. (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 36-45) The article derived the origin of Gypsies from ancient Egypt and declared them to be the people who had brought the achievements of civilisation in scientific knowledge to ancient Greece, and the Gypsy language to be the language which had influenced Greek (including deriving the name of Athens from “Atsingani”). The article was remote from the prevailing scientific understanding of the origin of

Gypsies at the time, but was rather a part of the intricate social struggle for an independent Bulgarian church, separate from the dominance of the Greek Patriarchy.

Nonetheless, there was an interesting ‘feedback’, the influence of this article on representatives of the Gypsy community. The following year, 1867, the new newspaper “Macedonia”, edited by P. R. Slaveikov, published a “Letter to the Editor” from the town of Prilep (Macedonia), signed by “An Egyptian”. (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 36-45) Leaning on the thesis about the origin of the Gypsies as an ancient people, developed by the newspaper editor, the author cited the Bible to claim that Gypsies had the right to have their own place in the Christian church. In the context of the church conflict on the Balkans back then (which continues to the present) the implication of this was that each nation (i.e. including the Bulgarians) should establish its own church.

The idea of each nation having its own church (like the idea of its own language and to a some extent the idea of its own alphabet as well) is perceived in the Balkans as proving a nation’s right to exist as independent and equal to others. Remembering this notion, we can understand the point of legends about Gypsies whose church was made of bacon (or cheese) – but they ate it, (Djordjević 1933: 29-30; Block 1936: 180) or another cycle of legends about the Gypsies having their own alphabet, but the donkey ate it. (Tong 1989: 169; Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 53-54)

These legends are popular among the Roma themselves and among the surrounding population as well. On the level of folklore they reveal the social status of Gypsies as being on a lower level (a public image which has still not undergone any considerable development). Sometimes there still is a mingling of separate themes, for example legends about the Jews hiding the Gypsy alphabet in a pyramid in the grave of king Pharaoh in Egypt. (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 26-27; Studii Romani 1998)

In the example of the “Letter to the Editor” from “An Egyptian” (a Gypsy, Ilia Naumtchev, who later on became a clergyman in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church), the concept of the Egyptian origin of Gypsies transcended the level of folklore and reached the realm of community historical awareness (and more specifically the awareness of its leaders). It became an active argument in the civil movement for emancipation of the Romani community in as early as last century. This trend of development was not an isolated phenomenon. In the beginning of our century, during the struggle of Bulgarian Gypsies against the ban on voting imposed on many of the nomadic and settled Muslim Gypsies in 1901, (Marushiakova and Popov 1997: 29-30) this historical concept was predominant as we can see from the documents of the First Congress of the Gypsies in

1905, defined by its organisers as ‘Coptic’ (i.e. “Egyptians”). The documents of the congress were signed by the representatives of the “Coptic population”. (“Vecherna poshta” 1905) Another interesting issue is that the self-identification of the Gypsies as “Copts” has some ancient roots as well. In many documents of the Ottoman Empire between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries they were referred to as “Kıpti”, i.e. “Egyptians”. (Marushiakova and Popov 2001). The first Gypsy organisation in Bulgaria, established in 1919, according to some sources, also carried the name “Egypt”. (Marushiakova and Popov 1997: 30)

In the course of time, however, and under the influence of the surrounding population, the concept of their Indian origin (which we will discuss later on) gradually spread among the Roma, and the concept of ancient Egyptian origin remained on the level of folklore. In some instances there has been an interesting combination with contemporary geographical knowledge, for example “my grandfather came to Sofia from Egypt, passing through Spain and France”. (Studii Romani 1997)

The Egyptian thesis, however, was far from disappearing once and for all from the Balkans. On the contrary, it underwent a powerful secondary revival in the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania, where it was transformed to a new and qualitatively higher level. Here we have in mind the processes in the communities of the so called “Egyupti / Egyupćani” (i.e. Egyptians) in Macedonia and Kosovo and the “Yevgi” in Albania in the last few decades. Until then these communities were perceived as Gypsies by the surrounding populations for centuries. Their contemporary state of being independent communities different from the rest of the Romani community, was explained mostly in a rather naive manner, mainly as a result of the social and political influences and pressures of the state and the surrounding population within former Yugoslavia and the new countries which were established later. (ERRC 1998: 34-38; Willems 1997: 1-3; Dujzings 1997: 194-222)

To understand these processes, we have to consider the development of the way in which various Gypsy communities in the Balkans often have had to exercise a choice of preferred ethnic identity.

Tendencies towards religious and ethnic assimilation of the Gypsies by the predominant communities have always existed in the Balkans. These processes, either voluntary or under various types of pressure, have existed since the times of the Ottoman Empire and in more recent times in the ethno-national Christian Orthodox countries. Simultaneously with this process, as early as the last century, tendencies emerged to

demonstrate a different identity, neither Romani, nor the same as the identity of the surrounding society. This was a reaction against the pressure of assimilation, but also seeking to avoid the widespread negative attitudes towards the Gypsies in the Balkans. For each Balkan nation the other nations may be (and almost always are) historical enemies, but they are still communities of the same rank, while the Gypsies have always been an exception: they are a community of the lowest order, incompatible with the others. That is why when Gypsies seek a new preferred identity, their search is always directed towards another minority, which has a higher social status than the Gypsy one, such as the Turks and Vlachs (i.e. Romanians) in Bulgaria and Greece, the Albanians, Turks and Vlachs in former Yugoslavia.

The adamant refusal of other minorities to accept the Gypsies has quite often led to a new 'third' road of development, the creation of a new identity as the ultimate measure. It is exactly this ultimate measure that we can observe among the Albanian-speaking "Egyupti / Egyupćani" in former Yugoslavia and "Yevgi" in Albania. It seems that in their communities these processes have acquired a routine and new dimensions in the overall context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of new states and nations. These processes began in the 1970s with the first attempts to have a separate entry for "Egyupti / Egyupćani" (Egyptians) in the population censuses in Yugoslavia. The long struggle ended with success in the population census in 1991. The establishment of the Egyptian association in 1990 in Ohrid, Macedonia, the Democratic Movement Party in 1991 in Struga, Macedonia, the formation of independent associations of the "Egyptians" in Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992; the establishment of similar associations in Albania (the first one was founded in Korcha in 1992); the formation of the Balkan Union of the Egyptians in 1998 in Ohrid – these are all stages in the development of a community in the process of formation. This development has been accompanied by presentation of the appropriate folklore, accompanied by 'scientific' explanation: the first book published by the Association of the Egyptians was dedicated to their myths and legends, (Risteski 1991) and the second one to their ethno-genesis, (Zemon 1996) i.e. again we have a repetition of the familiar Balkan patterns of putting their own folklore first and emphasising the extremely important place of their ancient history. It is of little importance to the community itself how scientifically justified are the theses about the origin of the "Egyptians", because in the Balkans each nation has its "own" historical school and positions on the key issues of historical knowledge, which almost never coincide with

those of their neighbours. This 'scientific' quest for the ethno–genesis of the “Egyptians” in Macedonia does not, however, emerge in a vacuum – to a great extent it corresponds to the legends of the “Agupti” living in the Rhodope mountains of Bulgaria, recorded in the 50's, where their origin was attributed to Egyptian slaves brought on the Balkans by the Roman soldiers. (Primovski 1955: 248)

Similar processes of a quest for a 'third road', for new variants of identity, can be observed in other Gypsy communities with a non-Gypsies preferred identity. They are not accepted as “Turks” by the surrounding Bulgarian population or Bulgarian Turks, so some of them prefer to call themselves simply “Millet” (i.e. people) or “Muslims”. They then look for explanations of their own origins, and such phenomena can still be observed at all stages of development, sometimes in an increasingly obvious way. We can cite the example of "Usta Millet" in the region of the town of Dobritch, who are now beginning to create their “own history” according to which they are the descendants of an unknown tribe of blacksmiths from Afghanistan, who were the most famous gunsmiths at the time of the Ottoman Empire. (Studii Romani 1999)

Another variation of this type of identity quest can be seen among some *Xoraxane Roma* (i.e. Turkish Gypsies) from the Ludogorie region. They say they are descendants of people of Arab origin, from the Koreysha clan, who lived in Bulgaria in 1200–1300 A. D. Proofs for their existence can be seen in the Muslim tombstones all over the region (Russe, Razgrad, Silistra, Dulovo, Isparih, Kubrat) dating from the reign of King Kaloyan around 1205 A.D. (Donald Kenrick, personal communication). This is a repetition of a persistent historical myth of the Arab origin which is frequent also among Bulgarian Muslims (the so called Pomaks), which is based on a mistaken reading (whether it is deliberate or not is another issue) of the years on Muslim tombstones which, of course, are dated according to the Islamic calendar, and are interpreted according to the Christian one.

The “Turkish Gypsies” (Muslims) have also a compromise variation in the explanation of their Arab origin. It combines this idea with the “Indian thesis”. According to one recording from the region of the town of Sliven, the Roma have come from India but they are ‘hasyl Arab’ (i.e. true Arabs). Their names are Arabic and since there is no great difference between the Indian and the Arab languages, it is easy to understand the words in Indian movies. This story is ‘confirmed’ through a familiar traditional formula – according to the informant this has been read in a secret book kept

in the attic of his school, and that was why he was punished by the school principal. (Studii Romani 1999)

The Rumanian-speaking Rudari in Bulgaria have introduced a similar variant, so far mostly at the level of folklore. They are beginning to present themselves as ‘true Vlachs’, or ‘the oldest Rumanians’. One of their popular legends derives Rudari origin from their ancient kingdom on the Balkans. Following its destruction some of them crossed the Danube and laid the foundations of the Rumanian people, while their true direct ancestors, the Rudari of today, remained in Bulgarian lands. In some instances their explanations already have begun to follow the trail of quasi–historical knowledge, leaning on naive historical research, (Ionov 1998) which asserts the unity of Rudari with present day Rumanians; gradually this reasoning is acquired by the Rudari themselves, assisted by the efforts of the autodidact authors.

Very important for the development of Romani historical thinking is the penetration of the “Indian thesis” about their origin. This process is determined by the advance of modern scientific knowledge on the Balkans and more particularly the concept of ancient India as the ancient Romani motherland. The Balkan nations became familiar with these scientific theses for the first time in the second half of the nineteenth century. They gradually entered the public mind in the first half of the twentieth century, and eventually reached the Roma and are now reflected in their legends. Such a legend is the one about their chief Berko who fought in India and then brought his army to new lands and founded the modern town of Berkovitsa in North-Western Bulgaria, near the chestnut forests which provided them with a living. (Marushiakova and Popov, 1994: 17-18) Thus they introduced new historical evidence into the formal structure of an old legend with an anecdotal content, based on naive etymology. This newly–created legend quickly acquired the form of quasi-historical knowledge and was reflected in the new Romani press from the second half of the 1940’s, for example: “Our minority has lived in Bulgaria since the seventh century, where our forefathers settled led by the leader of Gypsies all over the world – Berko – a very dangerous adversary of the then Indian Emperor – Abdurrahman”. (Romano Essi 1948)

The popularisation of the “Indian connection” was very much influenced by the two waves of Indian movies shown in Bulgaria which enjoyed wild success among the Bulgarian Roma in the 50’s and 70’s. In these movies the Roma found a linguistic proximity to their ancient homeland. Active processes of searching for new knowledge about their historical destiny developed in the Romani communities. A typical example

in this respect is Ali Tchaushev, Donald Kenrick's informant, who told him the legend cited in the beginning of the article.

Ali Tchaushev was born in the town of Shumen. In the 50's and 60's he was socially active in the system of the Fatherland Front (a popular organisation dominated by the Bulgarian Communist party) and established a number of Gypsy cultural and educational associations in Shumen and the surrounding region. He was vividly interested in Romani history and especially in the ancient Romani homeland, India. He made contacts with the Indian embassy and Indian students studying in Bulgaria. The Indian writer Chaman Lal mentioned him when he described his visit to Bulgaria in the beginning of the 60's: "A Muslim Gypsy travelled 500 miles to meet with me in Sofia". (Lal 1969 :13)

The legend told by Ali Tchaushev becomes quite easy to understand in this context (Kenrick 1985: 75). He was very well familiar with different sources of modern historical research on the origin and early migrations of the Roma, which he 'translated' into the ethno-cultural language of the Roma in Bulgaria in the guise of a 'folk' myth of origin, using the typical folklore means of asserting its truth value – "I have heard this from my old grandfather". (Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 63-65)

Another factor which had a considerable contribution for the development of Romani historical thinking on the Balkans was the development of the international Romani movement and the work of some of its activists in the Balkan countries, such as Grattan Puxon in former Yugoslavia and Donald Kenrick himself in Bulgaria. The establishing first World Romani Congress in 1971 in London, leading to the formation of the International Romani Union and the second Congress in Geneva in 1978 and subsequent congresses in Göttingen (1981) and Warsaw (1990, and the first World Festival of Romani Culture in Chandigarh in 1976 all broadened the worldview of the Romani representatives and acquainted them with the developments of modern science. The impetus towards building a Romani historical school within the framework of the academic traditions of the Balkan nations began to acquire a coherent momentum of its own, based on and directed towards close ties with the Indian homeland. It is reflected most vividly in the academic writings of Rajko Djurić, president of the Romani Union. (Djurić 1983, Djurić and All 1996)

The influence of contemporary historiography on the historical thinking of Balkan Gypsies was especially active after the changes in Eastern Europe in 1989. For Bulgaria in particular this included the end of bans on proclaiming Gypsy identity, and

an end to restrictions on the access to information which had been imposed by the former regime. These processes can sometimes be a transition from science to modernised folklore forms. A typical example of this is how Roma perceive the work of Donald Kenrick and more specifically his book “From India to the Mediterranean” published in Bulgaria (1998). Young Romani poets inspired by this book composed poetic myths and legends based on some historical themes from this book, which are currently in the process of being illustrated by Romani artists with the purpose of distributing them in the Romani environment in the form of cartoons. In view of the processes which have developed until now, when we were planning this paper, we thought it would not be too far-fetched to say that in a few years or decades the coming academic generation will discover Romani legends “in the field” in Bulgaria, such as legends about the Persian king Bahram Ghur or other historical personalities.

(Note: But, as is often the case, reality exceeded our expectations. Only six months later, during our expedition in Dobrudja in the autumn of 1999, we made a recording in the town of Dobritch of this legend told in Romanes. After he told us the legend, the informant reluctantly admitted having read it in Donald Kenrick's book. It is obvious that he will present it as a very old legend upon other occasions.)

Thus, the processes of change in the historical thinking of the Romani community are not limited to the works of a few authors but are often disseminated through the mechanism of folklore. The concept of an Indian origin is generally predominant now among most Roma on the Balkans, but it is still explained by the classical means of folklore and legends, and still uses traditional mechanisms to prove their truth (for example emphasising the presence of specific forefathers): “All Gypsies were in India. And a river came ... the Tsigan [Gypsy] river ... and it dragged all the Gypsies and scattered them everywhere ... This I have remembered from my grandfather ... He had also been there...His grandfather had lived in India.” (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 29) In other instances the legend has a pseudo-historical explanation – “... this was written in an old book ... published during the time of Todor Zhivkov, it was studied in schools back then”. (Studii Romani 1997)

The “Indian thread” however, is not the only one in the modern development of Romani historical thinking. Their double status – a specific ethnic community and at the same time a minority in the different ethno-national states on the Balkans, determines their place in the context of the respective national histories. A typical example are the

widely popular narratives relating the settlement of Roma in Bulgarian lands with the establishment and early stages of development of the Bulgarian state.

This is one of the few instances when we can confidently make hypotheses about the initial basis of a cycle of Gypsy legends. We have in mind a book written in the end of last century by the Bulgarian author Peter Odjakov. Very naively it “proved” that the Gypsies settled in Bulgarian lands together with the proto-Bulgarians led by king Asparukh, who laid the foundations of the Bulgarian state in the year 681 A.D. (Odjakov 1885: 8-11) This idea reached the Gypsies through the secondary channels of the macrosociety and immediately found a place in their folklore. There it began to develop along its own ways, following its own laws, reaching not merely completed folklore forms (such as the legend about the Gypsy chief Berko which pinpoints the time of his arrival in Bulgaria as the seventh century). There were also numerous publications in the Gypsy press in the end of the 1940s confirming this thesis. Eventually this led to changes in the community identity of some Gypsy groups. In some places in Bulgaria today we can find Gypsy groups which the surrounding population often ironically calls “Asparukhovi bâlgari” (Bulgarians of King Asparukh). Moreover, sometimes such Gypsies may come to perceive this concept as a group self-appellation and look for related scientific proofs of their origin. During the so called ‘Process of Revival’ in the second half of the 1980s, when Bulgarian scientists were ‘proving’ the Bulgarian origin of the Bulgarian Turkish population, the Ethnographic Institute with Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences received a letter from a group of Gypsies demanding that “science speak out” and explain their origin. The letter told about how they had come to Bulgarian lands together with the proto-Bulgarians of king Asparukh as blacksmiths servicing his army.

Legends exist also which associate the presence of Blacksmith Gypsies with the Bulgarian Khan Krum. In some publications and conversations with his Romani informants in the 1930s, Dr. Naiden Sheytanov popularised the hypothesis about Gypsy settlement in Bulgarian lands during the first half of ninth century (when Khan Krum was the ruler of Bulgaria), which had previously been suggested by other authors as well. Among the Roma this legend quickly grew into the popular contemporary story of the Gypsy blacksmiths who plated with silver the skull of the Byzantine emperor Nikiphorus I Gennik, who perished in combat in 811, and made it into a special cup from which Khan Krum would drink during feasts, according to Bulgarian patriotic legends. (Studii Romani 1997)

This line of thought which links the origin and early history of the Roma with important moments in Bulgarian history, is reflected in another thesis popular among the Roma on the folklore level. According to it they are heirs of a mythical kingdom destroyed by the armies of Alexander the Great during his conquests in the Middle East. The Roma who settled for good in Bulgarian lands, became the four main “castes”, together with Thracians, Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians. After the adoption of Christianity in 865 the Bulgarian nation emerged from this four “castes”. (Studii Romani 1998)

Similar is the development of the ideology of the political party Democratic Movement “Rodolyubie”, registered in 1998. According to its leader this is the party of the Rudara and the word Rudara does not derive from the word “ruda” (ore) but from the word “rod” (family or clan in Bulgarian) because “we are descendants of the first old Bulgarian clans who settled in these lands together with Khan Asparukh at the time when the Bulgarian state was founded”.

At present, the new stage in development of the Gypsies / Roma community leads to new forms of socially constructed quasi-historical knowledge which becomes part of the established Balkan traditions. At the same time the modern forms of scientific knowledge are combined with the old and modernised folklore legends. Typical in this respect are the works of Romani writers which present a complex and comprehensive picture of the ethnogenesis of Bulgarian Gypsies – some of them, the so called “Turkish Gypsies” (i.e. Muslims) are descendants from slaves brought to the Balkans from Egypt by Julius Caesar; others are descendants of the Indian mercenaries of Emperor Trajan, who settled in Bulgarian lands. In the new lands these two population groups mixed with the descendants of the ancients Thracians and Ilirians and thus the new community was born – the Roma (the name derives from “Romei”, i.e. Romans). Gradually some of them settled beyond the Danube and laid the beginning of the Rumanian people, yet others settled in Western Europe. (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 46-48)

Yet in other instances quasi-historical knowledge may be directed far back into the past, towards the roots of human civilisation. An example is the wish to derive the origin of Gypsies from Ancient Mesopotamia and prove their kinship with the ancient Sumerians. (Studii Romani 1996) A variant of this search for origins is the quick popularisation among the Roma of the concept of Gypsies as descendants from Mohendzho Daro, which appeared in other East and Central European countries. (Studii Romani 1998)

Some specific literary forms have found their place in the general framework of the modern emancipation processes of the Romani community. We can define them most generally as ‘historical neo-mythology’. These are the attempts to lay bridges to modern science or at least to use its formal features. A typical example is the poetry of the so called ‘author’s legends’ by the Roma poetess Sally Ibrahim. In her work she presents a new genre – ‘historical neo-mythology’ – on the border between folklore and fictional creativity. Sally Ibrahim’s texts (“Descendants of Atlantis”, and “The Roma Myth – a Truth”) actively use the ‘achievements’ of modern ‘unorthodox’ para-science. Through para-scientific phraseology the poems describe the extraordinary historical destiny of the Roma – their homeland is Atlantis, they are the messengers of God, missionaries of a higher civilisation, the disseminators of human culture around the world, their language is mankind’s proto-language (a number of naive etymological examples are cited to prove this point) ... (Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 65-68)

Similar are the speculations of the popular singer Anita Christie, which have appeared in the media quite a few times. According to her, the Gypsies come from the mythic town of Shamballa (popular in Bulgaria from the works of famous Russian painter and philosopher Nikolai Rërich) situated between India and China. In a cosmic Shamballa corresponding to the Shamballa on Earth, the Gypsies were ‘Buddhi-Manusha’ (meaning “people who are incarnations of Buddha”); they were masters of the great cosmic knowledge, which they had scattered among people around the world and it had been taken away from them but they would get it back. (Studii Romani 1998) Similar stories can be heard from other representatives of the Romani intelligentsia. (Studii Romani 1998) They link the popular ideas of Eastern religious philosophy with the theme of the Gypsies as a chosen people.

We should not be bothered by the fact that these concepts and writings belong to individual authors and are disseminated by individual members of the Romani community. Each folklore text belongs to a certain author upon its birth and it becomes a collective piece of work by way of its perception and function in a certain social environment. The fact that similar ideas thrive in everyday Romani life is proved by the statements, heard during field research, that Gypsies are neither Christians nor Muslims, they are actually Buddhists. (Studii Romani 1998) Usually informants cannot supply evidence about this fact, but this is an easy to overcome obstacle – publications by Romani authors, e.g. a Bulgarian Rom discovered elements of Buddhism in wedding customs of Muslim Gypsies: “The bride being put in a red dress, the painting of the

bride's hair and the songs sung by the bride's friends are all remnants from Buddhism". (Kyuchukov 1994: 18-19)

The idea of the Roma as 'a Chosen people' can be found in other levels today, moving away from folklore. For example, the coming of Islamic preachers among the Roma, (however restricted it may be because of the existing prejudice towards them), has led to the pilgrimage of Roma to Mecca. One of them, who came back from pilgrimage, told in detail about the dream he had there – how Allah gave him a mysterious book, written in the Romani language and containing the truth about Islam. (Studii Romani 1996) A variant of the idea of the Gypsies as 'a Chosen people' can be found in many hymns in the now popular among the Roma new Evangelical churches, which contain expressions such as "we are God's favourite children", "God loves us, the Gypsies" and others. (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 102-108; Studii Romani 1997) As we can see from this overview, Gypsies on the Balkans are living through processes of active change in community awareness. These changes, reflected in different historical ideas, function on different levels and acquire different eclectic forms (ranging from the traditional or very modernised folklore through quasi-historical knowledge to modern "unorthodox" para-science). The eclectic nature of these dynamic processes was heralded by the fact that this is a regular stage of development of the historical thinking of each nation. The Roma have a lot to make up for and this is the reason for the rapid development of this type of thinking.

The processes in the Gypsy community never cease, but at present, under the new social and political conditions they develop particularly rapidly and to a certain extent with many contradictions. We have to emphasise the place these processes have in the framework of an ever-growing Roma nationalism. And we also have to consider the fact that they are influenced by a number of 'external' factors coming from the macrosociety, not least among which is the scientific work of specialists whose writings, and the ideas and concepts they express, often penetrate quickly into the Gypsy environment. Again, this brings to the forefront the issue of the moral responsibility of scientists towards the target of their study.

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