

Roma's Identities in Southeast Europe: Macedonia

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Roma's Identities in Southeast Europe: Macedonia

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Roma's Identity and the Political Arena

Introduction

Andrea Boscoboinik and Christian Giordano

Introduction

Like most countries in the Balkan region, Macedonia¹ is a multiethnic state. Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Turks, Vlachs and Serbs, with Roma constituting the third largest group, coexist in this land. The research project "Perceptions, self-perceptions and social organization of Roma in Central and East European countries" was conducted in this context. Macedonia is the second country concerned by this project, the first one being Bulgaria² where the research was conducted in 2002.

In the meanwhile, Europe underwent an important event: ten Central and East European countries have become members of the European Union. With the accomplishment of this latest EU enlargement, Roma communities appear as a significant minority in the European Union. This means that Roma identity question is, today more than ever, a political question. This is one of the reasons why our report emphasizes more on politics and on the political aspect of Roma in Macedonia than our reports concerning Roma in Bulgaria. The stress on the political aspect is relevant when considering the problems of the Roma as political. For instance, problems of education, social problems, health conditions, and employment have a political significance. Moreover, a political consolidation of the Roma is considered necessary to have power and impact on politics and policies. The report that follows, authored by Azbija Memedova and Shayna Plaut, focuses on this aspect.

Methodological considerations and identity

The report is the result of a qualitative research based on interviews with people who define themselves as belonging to Romani groups. As in the case of Bulgaria, these interviews cover a wide range of geographical areas and informants' characteristics (age, gender, occupation, level of education, and social and economic levels). They thus include a wide representation of Roma people who were asked to talk about their opinions, life, perceptions, experiences, and points of view. Interviews were conducted in Skopje, Kumanovo, Stip, Tetovo, Bitola, and Ohrid.

The most relevant difference with the interviews conducted in Bulgaria is that two of the Macedonian interviewers (of whom one conducted almost all the interviews) are Roma women. Interviews in Bulgaria were conducted by non-Roma, although the Bulgarian researchers had to make use of a network of personal acquaintances to gain entry in the Roma community, as the studied ones, which are usually unlikely to open up. However, this fact could have influenced the answers of the

¹ For the sake of simplicity, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or the Republic of Macedonia is referred to as 'Macedonia'.

² The results of the Bulgarian research were published under the title "Roma's Identities in Southeast Europe: Bulgaria", in June 2003, Working Paper N° 8, Ethnobarometer.

interviewed people concerning their self-identification. Indeed, contrasting with the interviews in Bulgaria, the interviews conducted in Macedonia show that several people acknowledged being Roma. However, as in Bulgaria's case, people define themselves by religion as well, and sometimes religion affiliation is a stronger identity element. When asked what makes them Roma, answers ranged from 'a feeling', 'speaking Romani', to 'following and accepting the customs and traditions'. At times, however, these answers seem simply rhetoric. Knowing traditions does not always mean following them, as can be perceived from the interviews. Besides, there is the risk of spreading stereotypes like "Roma make extravagant marriages".

Interviewers' internal reports highlighted the fact that, in general, those who are well-integrated, who 'don't look' Roma (in terms of attire or skin tone) and are educated, identify themselves as Roma. Instead, those who are illiterate or less educated, who 'look' Roma, are unemployed, and have faced violence or discrimination, identify themselves less willingly as Roma. However, generalizing this observation would be a serious mistake since it is well-known that in the case of those Roma who have managed a social ascent, even a modest one, and thus a corresponding integration outside their own ethnic group, we can observe various *concealment* strategies by which these actors tend to disguise their origin as much as possible. Instead, the socially successful who displays his belonging, at times with rightful pride, will most probably become an influential member of the Roma elite, an activist of *identity management*, or even a political leader of his community.

It is a known fact that contact makes contrast. Thus, those who have or have had the possibility of being in contact with other groups are more aware of their identity. Indeed, from the interviews we can see that those who live in multicultural settings or neighborhoods acknowledge a Roma belonging more easily than those who live in Roma ghettos do. Contrary to the people interviewed in Bulgaria, many individuals interviewed in Macedonia have made the experience of migration. They lived for some years outside the country (most have been in Germany) and came back. The migration experience has modified their perception and self-perception. Then the identity of those who have migrated can be compared to the one of those who have remained. As mentioned in the report, the first ones had to be 'introduced' to another community. Hence, they had to think about who they were when confronted with others, when in need of presenting themselves. The ones that didn't move never had to think about their identity in case of self-presentation.

Any substantial differences between the Roma of Macedonia and those of Bulgaria as far as migration to Western countries such as Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is concerned, can be ascribed to the noticeable differences between the communist regimes set up in the two countries after World War II. In fact, Tito's Yugoslavia (which Macedonia belonged to at the time), after an initial period of closure started to open its frontiers, especially from the 1960s on, bringing about considerable east/west migration flows that involved not only many Roma from Macedonia but also from less economically advantaged regions in the country's south (Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc.). Instead, the Bulgaria of Georgi Dimitrov and Todor Zivkov, pegged on the Soviet system and an unswerving ally of Moscow, had nearly hermetically sealed off its frontiers with the West after World

War II. As such, no mobility was possible and thus there was no east/west migration.

We are aware that in any interaction there is a manipulation of identity, that identity is a dynamic process, and that it is composed of several aspects. Moreover, identity is contextual and each person may identify him/herself in various ways according to circumstances and the person to whom they talk: in our case the interviewer. The different affiliations of an individual are invoked for different purposes and on different occasions. Following an attitude of 'expected answer', a person may play with the different facets of his/her identity not to deceive the other, to keep a pleasant dialogue, and even to gain some advantages. Thus, the personal identification of the interviewer can bias the interviewee's responses.

Almost all interviewees know which sub-group he/she belongs to and have opinions and express judgements concerning the other sub-groups. Thus, for instance, a young man said in an interview, "*The Kovacs are more educated. The Barutchijas are called that way because in the past they used to make gun powder ("barut"), the Topanlijas are known for the peppers and are more gallant than the others, the Dzambas worked with horses and trade...*". For a man over his 70s, who belongs to the "Gjilanlijas" group, "*Only the Gjilanlijas are real Muslims*". According to him, the Gjilanlijas do not wed members of other Roma groups, because the others do not possess their culture, the good home upbringing and the *esnaf* (hard working nature). He also stressed his lack of fondness of the Dzambas Roma Group and said, "*They are a spoiled people who only lie*".³ This attitude of considering the own group as the best, the purest, and the highest ranked is a common characteristic among all Roma sub-groups, which are hierarchically organized.

However, as the report points out, there are other sub-groups, beyond an ethnographic definition, which are equally as important for the people concerned. "Economic status, education level and religion also heavily influence Romani internal means of self identification and their relationship to others." As mentioned by intellectuals interviewed in Macedonia, very little attention has been paid to viewing Roma as belonging to different social groups, as opposed to a unified, and isolated, cultural entity.

Theoretical matters

One factor that must be taken into account in any discussion of ethnicity is the difference between the ethnicity claimed by the people themselves and the one attributed to them by others. There is also the more complex possibility that the claimed or felt ethnicity of group members may be shaped by what is attributed to them by others. From Fredrik Barth (1969), we have already learned that ethnic identity is influenced from both sides of the boundary and that both ethnic groups achieve their identity and have it ascribed to them from outside. Moreover, different criteria may be applied in classifying themselves and in classifying the others. The report takes these aspects into consideration and analyses the Romani identity from and to 'Others'; i.e., how Roma perceive themselves and how they believe they are seen by other ethnic groups in society.

³ Azbija Memedova, internal document.

It also discusses the fact that the Roma are seen from the outside as having a weak identity, notwithstanding the fact that in Macedonia Roma do participate in similar rituals – i.e. 80 per cent of the Romani population speak the same mother tongue, Roma are recognized in the legal framework as a ‘nation’, and fulfill the anthropological definition of having a strong culture. However, in our opinion, these aspects do not define an ethnic identity. The fact of participating in similar rituals, speaking the same mother tongue or even having a strong culture does not imply having a collective ethnic identity with a political project.

According to Anthony Smith (1993: 28-29), an ethnic community is defined as “a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity”. These dimensions are not strongly represented among Roma and related groups. The members of these groups do not always concur under which name they want to be identified. There is no consensus among the various Roma and Roma related groups about a common denomination in which all groups might recognize themselves, and which could then be used at an international level. The different groups do not share many cultural elements. When we try to describe who they are – in which ways they are distinctive from other groups – we quickly run into trouble. Our problem concerns the boundaries of the group. Which criteria should be taken into account to define them? They have no exclusive livelihood, no exclusive language, no exclusive customs, and no exclusive religion. Some groups, being nomads or having been nomads in the past, do not present a symbolic attachment with a specific common territory. For these nomads and travelers groups, territory is not a relevant element. Moreover, given their scattered geographic distribution, they might feel a link with each country they have inhabited over the centuries more than with any other mythical ancestry land. The sixth and last point mentioned by Smith, i.e. that the people have to think of themselves as a group in order to constitute an ethnic community, is a condition lacking among the different groups.

Without the shared myths and memories, and the sense of solidarity they engender, we would be speaking of an ethnic category rather than a community. The ethnic category represents the loosest level of incorporation, where there is simply a perceived cultural difference between the group and outsiders, and a sense of the boundary between them (Hutchinson & Smith 1996: 6). Actually, Roma and related groups perceive a difference with the other majority and minority groups inhabiting the same country.

Political parties and NGOs

Macedonia presents several Roma political parties and, as in Bulgaria, since the mid-1990s there has been an explosion of NGOs, of which many were Romani. However, as in Bulgaria, interviews show that ordinary people continue to mistrust Roma political parties and politicians, as well as the NGOs’ real objectives.

Most interviewed people believe that politicians only follow their personal interest and careers and that NGOs’ directors keep the money for themselves. Azbija Memedova writes in an internal document from an interview résumé with a young student, volunteer in a Roma NGO, that he knows that the common Roma do not trust the non-governmental organizations at all and that most of them think that these organizations are manipulating the finances: *“If one Roma organization does*

something wrong or works improperly, the people think that all of the organizations are the same". According to him, only a few Roma organizations are really working professionally and are achieving visible results. He believes that the existence of these organizations opened several opportunities for many Roma, especially for the young ones that are receiving extra help, as for example, an opportunity to learn computer skills, foreign languages, etc. A major problem inside the organizations, according to that student and many other interviewees, are the inside conflicts and disunity that result in disagreements among the members and a multiplication of the Roma organizations: *"There is no unity between us. This problem also extends on the level of international Roma associations, when they are lobbying for the Roma rights. That is why we cannot achieve much"*. He locates the problem of disunity in the Roma political parties as well as in the low capacity to influence the political situations, most of all because of the lack of political power. He does not believe that the parties can help: *"I have not heard of a single case where a political party employed or helped anyone in Kumanovo"*. What bothers him most is the fact that the Roma political parties manipulate the low-educated Roma people during the elections on a local and on a national level, for instance by handing out flour before the elections.

Political parties and NGOs seem to compete with each other over which one helps the most. One gets this impression from interviews with potential beneficiaries who would need and ask for social help, as well as from interviews with leaders. An activist in a Roma NGO, gave up his party membership because in his opinion the party was active only before the elections. As a party, he said: *"We did nothing for the Roma people"*. Instead, in his opinion, most of what has been done for Roma by now is the result of Roma NGOs work. This leader believes that the Roma organizations and the political parties should cooperate closely, but unfortunately, such cooperation does not exist, as it does not exist either among the Roma political parties themselves or among the Roma NGOs. The conflict and the low level of cooperation that are evident among the Roma NGOs are explained by this leader as a *"lack of communication, hypocrisy, mistrust and competition among the Roma NGOs."*

According to this leader, a condition to improve the political situation of the Roma in Macedonia is to integrate all Roma intellectuals working in the different NGOs into the political parties, in order to improve their political powers. He would be ready to join a party when a political elite is created with the capacity to surpass the existing weaknesses and the lack of cooperation among the Roma in general. Another leader suggested that the various Roma political parties should unite in one single party in which all intellectuals would be involved. With a long-term program, such unification would have a greater effect in solving the Roma problems.

Most of the interviewed activists in the NGO sector consider the creation of an educated Roma elite in order to better represent Roma people as necessary: first through NGOs, then at political level, either in a Roma or a non-Roma political party. For one of them, today this is possible due to the increasing number of Roma in Macedonia receiving a good education. One activist Roma woman put it into these words: *"A political party and illiterate people don't go together."* For her,

only placing educated people in the right positions in the state, political parties, NGOs, and other institutions could solve all of the problems.⁴

Almost all the other interviewed said that they were not interested in politics, that they would not go to vote and that they did not know who represented the Roma in Parliament. Most know nothing about Roma NGOs as well, except the idea that they keep the money for themselves and should help more. Only one young man said: *"Although the people think that all the organizations are stealing and lying, I realized that these organizations are helping the people..."* From the interviews, one gets the impression that for ordinary Roma the only aim of a NGO is to give social assistance. This was also detected in Bulgaria. Very poor Roma, deceived into expecting social benefits from the State, expect to receive any kind of help from NGOs.

A further competitor of political parties and NGOs in the search for assistance is religious organizations. A woman converted to an Evangelist church said that she quit voting when she realized there was no help for anybody. She said she also asked a NGO for assistance, but that although she tried a couple of times, nobody helped her. Instead, she got humanitarian assistance from the Church of which she is a member.

Ethnic groups and politics

In our report on Bulgaria, we stated that there was an ethnicization process among Roma communities and related groups. In spite of the heterogeneity presented by the different sub-groups, there is a growing trend in some specific intellectual and political groups to consider them as a unified and homogeneous group. This 'gathering' process making one group out of many, creates confusion and may cause tensions. When Roma related groups such as Travelers, Sinti, Kale, Balkano-Egyptians, Ashkali, Beas, Yenishes, etc. are labeled as Roma, they contest this denomination as they consider themselves as being a distinct group.

We have distinguished at least three groups leading the above-mentioned process of 'ethnicization' from different points of view and with different purposes:

1) Roma elite groups

Roma elite has a rather recent origin and has been encouraged, often by external organizations, to better represent and defend the interests of the Roma communities vis-à-vis the majority. Roma elite groups have shown an increased concern in their community's culture and organization. They are proud of being Roma and they promote a sense of common belonging to a minority group, seeking to develop a shared consciousness. In this sense, there is an identity management of Roma communities, culturally and financially administered by the elites.

2) The surrounding population

The social and economic crisis favors the 'demonization' of Roma population, turned into scapegoats. In a serious economic crisis, some sectors of society instigate the feelings of fear and hatred towards a particular 'other' and victimize this group. The perennial struggle for scarce resources exacerbates cultural differences. The competition for jobs reinforces negative attitudes towards the Roma communities, which are then gathered into a homogeneous enemy group based on ethnic characteristics.

⁴ Azbija Memedova, internal document.

3) External scholars and activists

Finally, even external scholars and activists, sometimes unwillingly, help develop an ethnic group. The many researches, publications, and also organizations that have issued from recent interest in these communities, focalizing the attention on them as a distinctive group, favors the emergence of an 'ethnicization' process.

However, it must be noted that authors working on the ethnicity concept have hardly ever referred to the case of Roma. This is clearly seen in handbooks and readers on ethnicity where these groups have usually been absent. In academic books and researches, Roma have been considered either a minority, a social or political problem, but rarely an ethnic group.

The first two groups show the two poles of this 'ethnicization' process: a positive 'ethnicization' when it refers to the own group and a negative 'ethnicization' when it constructs the 'other'. The first one refers to positive values as identity, culture, language, whilst the second one evokes negative social behaviors.

Much argument in the theory of ethnicity is about the constitution of ethnic groups. In fact, we need not accept, as the theory of primordiality would suggest, that they are simply 'given'. Rather, we can consider that an ethnic group could be constituted to serve particular purposes. Which could then be the purposes for this ethnicization process?

As we have written in our report concerning Bulgaria, the segregation in which Roma communities are confined and the negative attitudes they have to endure bolster the idea in Roma intellectual minds that unification is essential to create a common feeling that could better defend general Romani interests, as they are convinced that the separated Romani communities would gain in force and confidence if they should feel they are sharing a common identity. Indeed, for some Romani leaders, if Roma were accepted as a non-territorial nation, this fact would lend greater international legitimacy to the advocacy of their individual and collective human rights, consequently improving their general living conditions as a people.

These leaders believe that international recognition of all Roma sub-groups as one ethnic group is crucial -- indeed, this would be the first step toward being considered as a 'nation without territory'. They argue that with the EU latest enlargement, being considered as a nation would allow Roma to demand an effective participation in the decision-making process and to play a role as other nations in the decision-making policies and debates.

Thus, recognition of Roma as an ethnic group and subsequently as a nation would be of primary importance at a political level. This was clearly declared and addressed during a conference in Skopje, Macedonia, organized by the Macedonian office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (www.fes.org.mk), on 12-14 November 2004, whose title was "Political participation of Roma". One of the main arguments to defend this political participation is the fact that the number of Roma citizens is larger than the population of some member states of the European Union.⁵

⁵ Peter Thelen, November 2004, in a document concerning this conference, at www.fes.org.mk

Conclusion

The information gathered from interviews with Roma people in Macedonia is very similar to the information gathered from interviews in Bulgaria. The slight differences are probably due to methodological aspects and choices. Thus, we are able to maintain that the idea developed in our previous report, i.e. that there is a process of ethnicization of the different Roma communities, remains. This is associated with the development of an educated Roma elite. Besides, the political dimension of homogenizing a Roma identity seems increasingly evident.

From our research, it appears clearer than two years ago in Bulgaria that to present an homogeneous Roma group in the political arena appears to the actors themselves as an increasingly essential strategy to achieve power and impact on politics and policies. Today, when a single ethnic party of the Roma will seek election in the upcoming 2005 national elections in Bulgaria, the analogies with Macedonia become increasingly evident. The report underlines that unifying and giving recognition to Roma as a 'nationality' offers the opportunity of recognition not only at international level but also at a national one. Roma identity is closely linked with a political action, with a 'political face'. Hence, a supposedly weak Roma identity is explained by a lack of a strong political presence. Here, identity is linked with political participation and the analysis is oriented towards these two levels. Our researchers touched only in passing on the problem of whether a groups' identity, in this case the Roma's, should necessarily be defined in terms of culture or ethnicity. Such an approach is clearly influenced by the paradigm of the so called cultural studies. The relevance of ethnic and cultural identity is indeed undeniable, in terms of resources, constructions, and at times even inventions, in the political struggle for the acknowledgement of a group that is regarded as "Other". However, the social and economic dimension of collective belonging and affiliation is no less important. It indeed represents the structural dimension of any social group. This is true above all and particularly of the Roma in Macedonia and Bulgaria (as well as those in several other countries) who represent the poorest and thus most socially vulnerable and marginalized economic stratum of the respective national societies. Ultimately, the Roma of Macedonia may be seen as a collectivity with the characteristics of an *ethno-class* whose members occupy the lowest ranks in the stratification system of this country's society.

In the end, these observations make us wonder whether the Roma community's ethnicization or, more specifically, whether the group leaders' utilization in the political arena of identity narratives, discourses, and strategies based on the intentional emphasis on specific cultural traits and/or a shared origin represents the most appropriate method to foster a better acknowledgement and to champion the interests of this transnational community that has been disregarded, ignored, or, worse still, stigmatized and persecuted to the point of genocide. Being acknowledged on the political scene as a nationality or ethnic minority could turn into a trap that does not imply an improvement of image, nor less discrimination, nor a disruption of the vicious circle of exclusion. This is so precisely because an *ethnopolitics* does not tackle the fundamental social questions such as poverty, employment, training, etc; i.e., it leaves out the crucial problem of full integration in society. The self-segregation process within ethnic boundaries on the other hand could spark off further discrimination and exclusion strategies in the surrounding macro-society. Thus, the belief that a policy of ethnicization or *ethnogenesis* is, so

to speak, the necessary step, the precondition, or the guarantee to solve socioeconomic problems, implies a mechanistic and ultimately a narrow view of social processes.

Blank Face, Private Strength: Romani Identity as Represented in the Public and Private Sphere

Introduction

Claims for identity, or the lack thereof, is a dangerous weapon. History has shown a fear of people who cannot clearly state who they are or where they are going. Such people are treated as potentially dangerous: either as spies or as people who have no loyalty. They are also seen as easily manipulated. On the other hand, there is a push to label one's enemies as people with neither history nor identity – thereby rendering them impotent and dangerous yet, insignificant. (Keen: 1988) Although the two examples are similar, the first example is *a lack of identity* and the later is *purposefully erasing or disabling a group from being able to strengthen and present an existing identity*. Roma throughout the world have needed to face this presumed “lack of identity” in order to combat centuries of attempted cultural, ethnic and – at times physical – erasure. The question remains, to whom must Roma *prove* their identity and by what standards?

As Stuart Hall noted when expounding upon his own multifaceted identity in a 1989 speech, there is often an assumption, if not a demand, that identity remains the stationary focal point surrounded by flux: “The logic of discourse of identity assumes a stable subject i.e.: we’ve assumed that there is something we can call our identity which, in a rapidly shifting world, has the great advantage of staying still.” (Hall in Eley and Suny, 1996. pg: 337-349). Policing identity, and insisting that people speak with one voice and vision or risk being spoken for or, worse, written off, often becomes the norm when evaluating the efficacy of any given group’s “cause”. This is no less the case with Roma. Since the fall of socialism, “the Romani plight” and therefore the necessity to understand “Romani identity” has become a common theme on the international (particularly European) level (Barany: 2002). With the increasing integration of Europe, there has been a marked increase in the number of books written about Roma along with the rise of “focus groups” such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE’s “Roma/Sinti and Gypsy Issues” on a European level. However, as noted above, the majority of this literature has been initiated, if not written, by people outside of the society examined and often times this information does not circulate back to the “subject” of such research: the Roma.⁶

The purpose of this paper is to explore Romani identity in Macedonia, particularly how Roma position themselves within the macro-society and within their own culture⁷. *We are operating under the notion that Romani society is not homogenous but that this fact is not unique to Romani society; rather, no ethnic group has a singular, monolithic identity*. What is unique among Romani society in post-socialist (state-centered) Macedonia, is their lack of

⁶ For further information on the lack of domestic academic discourse on Roma please see Plaut: 2004.

⁷ The term macro-society is being used to discuss the social, political and ethnic dynamics of the Macedonian state. It is a common misconception that Roma interact only with the dominant ethnicity of the state, in this case ethnic Macedonians. As will be noticeable throughout the interviews, Roma are citizens of the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Macedonia is the home to six different recognized “nationalities”: ethnic Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Bosniaks and Roma. Roma interact with all “nationalities.” The term “culture” is extremely contentious and we respect the difficulty in defining it. However, for purposes of this paper we will use the definition proposed by Gjorgy Tonovski, a Macedonian sociologist: Culture as a “complex shape which inside includes: knowledge, beliefs, skills, morals, law, rituals and all other possibilities and habits which are accepted by a person as a member of the society.”

a singular political position, therefore the heterogeneity found among all cultures appears exaggerated because of a lack of Romani “public-face.” Or, in other words: Upon independence in 1991, Roma, who were historically economically, socially and politically marginalized and disenfranchised, were given the “space” to be politically recognized in the framework of ethno-politics through official recognition in the constitution, language rights and access to media licenses. However, Romani politicians were starting on unequal footing and were therefore incapable, or unwilling, to utilize this nationalist strategy and therefore are seen as weak, and easily manipulated, political actors.

We do not take this to be an authoritative “answer” to the question of Romani identity – in fact we clearly problematize the idea that *any* group of people should be asked to articulate *one stable identity* (Hall: in Eley and Suny, 1996, Maaluf: 2001). Although Roma have a strong sense of belonging to the ethnic group “Roma,” this is fed and nurtured on the micro (familial and community) level rather than on the macro (state) level⁸. We break this argument down into the following points which we will address in our paper:

- 1) Macedonia is a highly politicized country where one’s success on the “macro-societal” level is directly related to one’s participation and identification, most often through the use of census numbers, with the political sphere;
- 2) The political sphere in Macedonia has emerged as an “ethnic party system” as defined by Horowitz (1985) and demands a unified (ethnic) public face;
- 3) Roma are lacking strong political leaders and representation within the party system and therefore have little access to public power and representation.

Therefore, although Roma in Macedonia do participate in similar rituals -- eighty per cent of the Romani population speak the same mother tongue, Roma are recognized in the legal framework as a “nation” and fulfill the anthropological definition of having a strong culture --, Roma are seen (from the outside) to have a weak identity because the majority of the Romani population is alienated from the formal world of party politics and power, and therefore have not crafted a unified (domestic) political image.

Structure of the paper

To begin any discussion on identity, one must examine the wider socio-political and cultural context. The first section of this paper will briefly discuss the historical position of Roma within Macedonia starting from the Ottoman Empire up to the disintegration of Yugoslavia.⁹ We will then explore the disturbing rise of ethno-politics/polarization within the Republic of Macedonia and the (nominal) place that Roma hold within this sphere. It is our belief that Roma are perceived by the ethnic Macedonians as “loyal” whereas the ethnic Albanians view them as “too loyal” to the state and that the public discourse regarding Romani identity is often created outside of the community (if not the country). We also argue that Romani politicians are following a similar, but relatively inefficient, trend of ethno-politics. It is our

⁸ As discussed later in this paper such interest is increasing on the macro level based primarily on the interest of international donors/pressure. However attention to the public identity of Roma is still primarily affecting individual actors rather than the Romani population of Macedonia as a whole.

⁹ For a more in-depth history of Roma within Macedonia under Ottoman and socialist policies, please see *Explaining the Political Integration of Minorities: Roms as a Hard Case*, chapters one and two (Eben Friedman: 2002, PhD dissertation). For information during the interwar periods please see Crowe: 1996.

argument that the lack of a strong political presence within Macedonia is one of the key factors for a weak *public* Romani identity.

The second section of this paper follows from the first by surveying how Roma are discussed within public and cultural discourse, most notably within the academy, cultural production and political statements. This section primarily utilizes the work of non-Romani literature. It is our belief that Roma are most often ignored by the academic community unless such intellectuals are commissioned through international agencies to engage in specific research. Cultural production tends to run on old, stereotype-ridden motifs, particularly in the area of film and song. As for political statements by non-Romani politicians, though few, they have generally been supportive of Roma as both a people and an “issue.” Most recently the current president Branko Crvenkovski (at the time the prime minister) spoke before other Eastern European heads of state, the World Bank and the Open Society Institute proclaiming his country’s commitment and support to the Romani population.

The last two sections examine Romani self-perception, both *of* the macro-society and Romani identity *within* such society. These are broken into: how Roma perceive themselves and how they believe they are seen by other ethnic groups in society; both examine issues of region, socio-economic status, education level, language, cultural/religious practice, prejudice and identity “switching/hiding”. These sections focus primarily on the writings of Romani intellectuals and the interviews themselves. It is our belief that Roma fulfill all of the requirements of being recognized as an ethnic group with a strong cultural identity. However, because they do not participate effectively in the macro-level (political), the cultural identity is transmitted mostly on the micro-level (familial and communal.)¹⁰

Methodology

Fifteen interviews were conducted with people who self-identified as Romani between September and December 2003¹¹. All interviews were conducted by trained sociologists; interviews were conducted in the Macedonian language and in locations most comfortable to the interviewee. The majority (11) of the interviews were conducted by Azbija Memedova, the interviews in Tetovo and Stip (two each) were conducted by Mabera Kamberi and Dervisha Hadzic, respectively. Whereas both Azbija Memedova and Mabera Kamberi are self-identified Roma women, Dervisha Hadzic is Bosniak. Whatever differences in information presented based on the ethnic identity of the interviewer can only contribute to further analysis of Romani identity in Macedonia.

The interviewees were selected based on the following criteria:

- regional diversity within Macedonia

¹⁰ This can be juxtaposed to that of ethnic Albanian identity which prides itself on outside cultural conformity through the use of flags, patriotic songs, language codification etc. Please see E. Freedman: 2002a.

¹¹ The exception was one woman (“M”) who was twenty-three at the time of the interview and grew up in the Romani mahalas. Although identified in the Romani community as belonging to the Msri Roma group (Orthodox Roma who live in Macedonia), she does not identify as Roma herself. That said, she lives in the Romani mahala of Shuto Orizari, speaks Romani, is married to a Rom and her upbringing is nearly identical to that of other Roma from that community. We hesitated to include her in this analysis since she does not self-identify, but ultimately decided that her unique position added to the depth of research.

- diversity in age
- diversity in gender
- diversity in level of education
- diversity in socio-economic status
- diversity in levels of “activism/public life”
- “traditional” and “integrated”
- religious affiliation

In order to ensure a varied sample, Azbija Memedova utilized her own network in the Romani population by identifying potential interviewees. She then explained the project to them over the phone and arranged an appropriate time and place with those who consented to be interviewed. Interviewees were not assured financial compensation, but food and drink were brought to their homes and on three occasions money was given at the end of the interview without the interviewees’ prior knowledge.

Although the majority of the interviews took place one-on-one, there were some notable exceptions. In Kumanovo, the participants chose to be interviewed in a group. In Stip, interviewee D. accompanied Dervisha Hadzic to interview M.N. whereas in Bitola, E.’s colleague was present during her interview. Additionally two interviews in Skopje took place in interviewee F.’s home where F. walked in and out of the conversation although she did not participate.

The interviews themselves took two to six hours with the average time being four hours. As noted above the interviews were all conducted in Macedonian language (although the option was given to those interviewed by Azbija Memedova to speak in Romani) and were recorded. After the interview the tape was transcribed by the interviewer; the length of the transcripts varied in a range of 15-40 pages. A summary was then made and translated into English.¹² The following analysis was made utilizing the English language summary; if questions arose regarding clarity then the original Macedonian transcripts and/or the interviewees themselves were consulted.

With few exceptions, the literature currently available on Roma in Macedonia is insufficient. Too often writers on Romani issues will embrace the diversity of the Romani population but over-simplify the diverse and at times divisive demographics of Macedonia, whereas scholars on Macedonia tend to (at best) reify and (more often) ignore the heterogeneity of the domestic Romani population. Three notable exceptions are: Victor Friedman and Eben Friedman along with the researchers at the Greek Helsinki Committee; however all write within the academic sphere and most often publish outside of Macedonia and, most often, in the English language. We have used their work, along with that of prominent domestic Romani intellectuals, Trajko Petrovski and Ljatif Demir along with Andzej Mirga, a Romani activist from Poland, to explore and analyze Romani identity within Macedonia.

In selecting the people to be interviewed, diversity of socio-economic (and educational) status along with gender and age balance was ensured. Along with these interviews we chose to speak with other intellectuals including two sociology professors and a *hodja* (*Muslim religious leader*) to better examine different aspects of Romani identity(ies) and how they are handled within the academic and religious spheres, respectively.

¹² Ms. Memedova and Ms. Hadzic utilized the same Macedonian-English translator. Ms. Kamberi used a different translator.

The overall theoretical framework utilized was one of cultural studies and political-anthropology and we were particularly influenced by the work of Stuart Hall and Maaluf. We consulted a variety of materials focusing on identity construction in general and Roma in particular along with literature from the fields of: ethnography (Petrovski), political science (E. Friedman, Petrova), socio-linguistics (V. Friedman), sociology (Gjordjevic), anthropology (Mirga) and cultural production (Demir). For specific information regarding the period of transition and the increase in ethno-politics we relied on domestic legal documents (the Ohrid Agreement and the Constitution) and analysis provided by European Centre for Minority Issues, articles in the journal *Ethnopolitics*, along with other think-tanks/NGOs addressing interethnic issues in Macedonia.

We also drew on our previous work and experience as researchers and activists with Romani populations throughout the region, particularly in Macedonia. It should be noted that Azbija Memedova is a university-educated sociologist, born in Skopje, Macedonia who has been involved with interethnic relations and Romani activism (particularly focusing on women's rights) since 1996. As noted above, she identifies as Roma. Shayna Plaut is a Fulbright researcher and journalist from the United States working in Macedonia. She has been working on Romani issues since 1999 and wrote her master's thesis on self-representation within Romani media. She is not Roma. Although this text is written in English our sources were originally in English, Serbian and Macedonian; translations from Serbian or Macedonian into English were done by Ms. Memedova.

Historical Context

Ottoman Empire

Macedonia, although home to neither major port nor thoroughfare, historically has been a contested locale, often serving as the border in a succession of empires. Although Roma are noted in Byzantine and Serbian literature dating back to the 13th century, more consistent references to Roma can be found when Macedonia was subsumed into the Ottoman Empire in the late 1300's. As Angus Fraser noted, "The attitude of the Ottoman empire towards Roma was more tolerant than that of most other countries'. Whereas in Western Europe Roma were legally banished, assimilated, forcibly settled and transported to other continents as hard laborers...the Ottoman Empire discriminated against Roma mainly in terms of taxes and public order." (Fraser: 1992, cited in Koinova CEDIME-SE: 2000). The reason for this differentiation of treatment was based on the particular system of stratification within Ottoman society. Whereas today "nationalities" are often determined on the basis of linguistic or geographical differences the millet system divided people based on religion (Demir: 2002). Therefore it was not unusual for a person to speak Albanian but be classified as a Turk (based on religion) or for a person to speak Serbian and be classified as a Greek (based on religion).

The millet system offered an incentive to those who converted to Islam by eliminating a "head tax" levied on non-Muslims although this was sporadically applied to Roma who, regardless of religion, were at times forced to pay the "head-tax" and other times were exempt. (Marusiakova and Popov: 2000 cited in Koinova, CEDIME-SE:2000). Regardless, the influence of the Ottoman Empire on Macedonia as a whole was quite pronounced as many Roma converted to Islam and were, more or less, left alone. When the Empire began to fall Roma sided evenly with the Serbian monarch and the Ottomans; their allegiance appeared to be based more on geography/religion than on ethnic solidarity. (Crowe: 1996).

World War I - World War II – Yugoslavia

When Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo (then part of the kingdom of Serbia), Roma fought along side of the Serbian army and suffered many losses. In fact a monument was built commemorating the sacrifices made by the “Gypsy” soldiers in defense of the state. (Crowe: 1996). Yugoslavia (including Macedonia) was invaded during World War II and many young men (and to a lesser extent women) joined the partisans to fight the Axis powers. As our oldest interviewee, H., recalled, he was 14 when he joined the Partisans. This feeling of loyalty to a “state” was, and is, a common element of Romani identity recognized both within the Romani population and from without. (V. Friedman: 1995, 1999, E. Friedman: 2002 b).

Marshal Tito was heavily influenced by Stalin’s 1942 idea of balancing cultural plurality within a socialist framework and thus borrowed and maintained the Soviet system even after the two countries’ 1948 split. Yugoslavia therefore had a highly regulated, and hierarchical, system of nations (*narod*), national minorities (*narodnosti*) and ethnic groups (*etnički grupi*) – all of which, with the exception of ethnic groups, were allowed certain levels of linguistic instruction and cultural enhancement supported by the state.¹³ The lowest category was that of “*etnička grupa*” which consisted of Jews, Vlachs and Roma; there was no special legal provision or protection given to its members. That said, even under socialism, Roma were legally recognized as existing and able to “preserve their culture” both on the Yugoslavian level and that of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. (E. Friedman: 2002a). Roma were recognized in the constitutional revision of 1974 and, as Victor Friedman states:

While they (Roma) have been subjected to discrimination...they have not been the target of the kind of racist violence that has occurred and still occurs elsewhere in Europe. In fact, in the complex ethnic mosaic of Macedonia, the Roms have maintained their separateness while at the same time functioning as an integral and accepted part of everyday Macedonian life. (V. Friedman: 1999, p. 1)

This policy stands in sharp contradistinction to that of other Eastern European countries. Unlike other countries that had special commissions and reports created to deal with the “Gypsy Problem,” Yugoslavia’s policy can best be described as one of “benign neglect.”¹⁴

How such macro-policy (or lack of policy) affected “Romani identity” in Macedonia is a matter of contention; what can be seen is a recognition, on the part of the Yugoslavian and Macedonian state, that Roma are a part of the “Macedonian landscape” and have been for many centuries. (V.Friedman: 1999) What can also be seen is that Roma were and are considered “loyal” citizens of the state, that Roma in Macedonia see Macedonia as their

¹³ “*Narod*” were the majority of the people living on Yugoslav territory who did not have an external state i.e.: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and after 1972, Muslims. “*Narodnost*” was the classification for people who had an external “homeland” i.e.: Albanians, Hungarians and Turks etc. who had a large and often concentrated presence and therefore had certain political and linguistic recognition within certain republics.

¹⁴ This is not to say that Yugoslavia denied that it had a Roma population. In fact, the word “*Cigan*” (Gypsy), which is considered offensive, was specifically prohibited in 1971 under the passage of that year’s antidiscrimination law under the League of Communists. (E. Friedman: 2002a) Another important historical note is that following the 1963 earthquake which destroyed the Romani mahala (neighborhood) of Topaana, homes were built for the Roma who were left homeless in the area now known as Shuto Orizari.

home and that there is a lack of a “fear” of the Romani population by the majority, especially in comparison to that of ethnic Macedonians towards ethnic Albanians. (Kanev: 1996, E. Friedman: 2002b). Stated more simply, one can assume it is possible for an ethnic Romani man/woman to consider him/herself a Macedonian citizen and Roma. What is not always understood is if an ethnic Macedonian will consider a Rom to be an equal citizen. This point is beyond the scope of this paper but deserves further research.

Independence – The Ohrid Agreement

Upon independence in 1991, Macedonia had to fight for international recognition and therefore the country was born in a defensive position. The preamble of the Macedonian Constitution from 1991, although explicitly mentioning Roma as equal citizens with all other “nationalities,” left no doubt that ethnic Macedonians were the primary owners of the state¹⁵. The culturally dominant status of the ethnic Macedonians in the preamble has indicated that the character of the state is premised on the rights to self-determination of the Macedonian nation (Engstrom: 2002). It also clearly set the stage for continued ethnic polarization within the society.

Since independence, the majority of Roma are still consistently surviving below recognized standards for health, economic viability and education; in fact, Roma (with an official population of 52,000 based on the 2002 census and an unofficial population spanning 130,000-200,000), are nearly universally regarded as the most marginalized population within Macedonia (Barany: 2002; www.worldbank.org 2003; Elezovski: 2003). It is our position that one of the main reasons for Romani apathy towards the political system is that even with legal recognition and political participation, their status remains extremely bleak.

According to David Horowitz (1985, p. 3-54), “to be an ethnic party, a party does not have to command an exclusive hold of the allegiance of group members. It is how the party’s support is distributed and not how the ethnic group’s support is distributed that is decisive.” There can be no doubt that by the end of Yugoslavia, Macedonia was operating under an ethnic party system and this process only accelerated throughout its independence (E. Friedman: 2002a). Macedonia was the first country to have formal Romani political representation e.g.: Romani political parties and a Romani member of parliament¹⁶. However at the time of independence, Romani political parties did not have “requests for additional political rights” on their agenda. Their focus was on much more practical issues such as:

¹⁵ Although many will argue this was a means of de-politicizing the large ethnic-Albanian minority it seems rather a way of distancing Bulgaria and Greece from any ethnically based territorial claims on the Republic of Macedonia. (Macedonia: The Conflict and the Media, 2003)

¹⁶ As of 2003, there are four Romani political parties. The first party, created in 1990, was the Party for Complete Emancipation of Roma of Macedonia - represented in Parliament from 1990 – 1998 by its founder, Mr. Abdi Faik. The program of the party presents itself as “committed to complete sovereignty of the Macedonian state, fatherland of the Macedonian people, that is the Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Muslims, Serbs and other nationalities which live on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia.” From 1998 – 2002, the Roms were represented by Mr. Amdi Bajram, President of the Union of Roms of Macedonia. The third Romani party formed in 1992 is the Democratic Progressive Party of the Roma in Macedonia, lead by Bekir Arif and is focused primarily on increasing the pace of educational reforms (V. Friedman: 1999) The party currently represented in the Macedonian Parliament the United Party of Roma in Macedonia, was formed in 1999 and is represented by Mr. Nezdet Mustafa.

improving living conditions of the Romani population in Macedonia in terms of healthcare, infrastructure and hygienic conditions in addition to cultural rights such as, primary-school education in Romani and future work on standardizing the Romani language within the institutional framework of the Institute for Macedonian language.¹⁷ (E. Friedman: 2002 b, V. Friedman: 1999). Because the Romani political parties were focused much more on survival than on building political power, they were often seen as easy allies, so much so that former MP Amdi Bijram once publicly stated, “I will always vote with the party in power.”

Although statements such as Bijram’s may be both honest and realistic, it does not serve well in the arena of performative politics and in 2001, when open conflict broke out among ethnic Albanian rebels and the Republic of Macedonia’s armed forces, Romani politicians once again side-lined themselves to being a non-actor. In fact, in our research, we could not find public statements regarding a specific and consistent “Romani” position to the conflict. As can be seen from the opinion of E.I., a 68 year-old Romani intellectual from Tetovo, this has both positive and negative consequences, *“During the 2001 conflict...the Roma did not take any side and that is good because later [if they had] that could have brought upon long-term effects... But from the other hand now, when the basis of the Framework Agreement is defined, one can see that some rights and aims are benefiting one nationality and leaving out the rest.”* The Romani “neutrality” was on one hand distrusted by the Albanian community, and on the other hand was misused by the Macedonian media¹⁸.

The signing of a peace treaty in Ohrid (known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement) under the watchful eye of international diplomats, brought an end to the armed conflict. Although the reasons and actors behind the events of 2001 are still debatable, suffice to say the large (25 per cent according to the 2002 census) ethnic-Albanian population was granted more linguistic, political and representative rights than under the previous Constitution. The Ohrid Agreement strengthened the “20 per cent threshold” where regions that are at least 20 per cent of any ethnicity can have more autonomy in issues dealing directly with that municipality in accordance to the European Charter on Local Self-Government (www.president.gov.mk/eng/info/dogovor.htm). However, although all ethnic groups in Macedonia were to benefit from this policy, it is the common perception of people living within Macedonia that the Agreement was with only the ethnic Albanian population in mind (see Shadow Report on Minority Issues: 2004, and Ethnobarometer’s “Crisis in Macedonia”, Working Paper #6, 2002). Therefore, although legally Roma could benefit from many of these reforms it is unclear how the Romani politicians are utilizing the Framework to push Romani visibility within the state institutions. Upon reviewing news-clippings we were unable to find an article or interview that specifically addressed this issue.

¹⁷ The history of Roma and non-Roma “intellectuals” working together on Roma language is spotty, but there is a history. In 1992 the Ministry of Education and the Philology Faculty at the University of Skopje sponsored a conference to examine the possibility of teaching Romani as an elective language class within the public primary schools. Although there are conflicting opinions regarding the overall success of the conference there were some definite conclusions including a twelve-point guideline for written Romani within Macedonia. The production of qualified Romani language teachers, recognized by the state, was never resolved. (pc: Jasarov 28 June 2004)

¹⁸ Similarly to Serbia, some Roma have joined the Macedonian security force not only because of “loyalty” and patriotism to the state but rather because of the significant monthly salary (350 – 400 euro). The fact that a significant number of the soldiers involved in the conflict were Roma caused many ethnic Albanians to view Roma as siding with the state.

Ethnic Politics and Romani Participation in the Public or Political Sphere

The history of Romani position in Macedonia as discussed above, as well as current events bring us to five main points regarding Romani identity:

- 1) Macedonia continued Yugoslavia's policy of "benign neglect" towards its Romani population but rather viewed Roma as a "harmless and loyal" if not "weak" ethnicity.
- 2) Macedonia is a highly multi-ethnic country with a sizable, and politically active, ethnic Albanian population and has thus been preoccupied with the demands of that population.
- 3) Macedonia is a country where political involvement is crucial to gaining access into the public sphere.
- 4) The public sees such political involvement in strict ethnic divide.
- 5) The granting of "nationality" status to Roma within the 1991 constitution was simply an act of political rhetoric – it did little (if anything) to affect the actual living conditions of Roma "on the ground." However, the Romani political parties did not seize upon this opportunity to solidify a cohesive public image of a Romani identity, thus failing to push Romani issues into the foreground.

Consequently, the majority of the Romani population did not find themselves represented in the political sphere and instead chose to exercise their "identity" and their clout on the community or familial level. It is not a coincidence that the majority of the Romani NGOs activities are focused on the community and family or that if Roma choose to participate on the public level it is often within the framework of "civil society" which often amounts to being active in the NGO sphere. Put more simply, the NGOs are working on either the micro level or the international level but have circumvented the state. Thus the state-level is where the public face of Roma is most absent.

When current president Branko Crvenkovski described the status of Roma in Macedonia to the Hungarian parliament he repeated two points: Macedonia is the only country where Roma are specifically mentioned in the constitution and Macedonia is the only country that has a state-sponsored program in Romani and two private Romani television stations. We have already addressed the first point and we will briefly discuss the issue of Romani media. The mid 1990s saw an explosion of NGOs in Macedonia, often generously backed by international donors. Many of these NGOs work with a specific ethnic community; Romani NGOs were no exception. At the time of this writing there are 120 registered Romani NGOs in Macedonia, 30 of which are considered active (MCIC NGO Directory). The mid 1990s was also a time for a rapid increase in private radio/television, many of these new radio and television stations were also founded to serve a specific ethnic community. Currently there are 155 legal electronic media outlets in Macedonia, five of which cater to the Romani population (pc: Belichanec 28 August 2003, www.srd.org.mk).

Roma media can and does serve as a source of cultural pride, as an informative medium and as a cultural bridge to both Roma and non-Roma but it is not living up to its own goals or potential.¹⁹ Romani media are all local media serving a listener/viewer base of 15,000 – 200,000. Legal Romani media is found throughout Macedonia with a concentration in the

¹⁹ For more information specifically addressing the relationship between Romani media and Romani NGOs in Macedonia please see Plaut, "Information Impasse: Mapping Communication Patterns between Romani Media and Romani NGOs in the Republic of Macedonia." (2003)

western part of the country and Skopje.²⁰ According to their written mission statements, all Romani media were founded with the goal to inform and educate the Romani population in their community and they all (to differing degrees) have news, educational programming, and contact shows. There is, however, a severe gap between how Romani media envisions itself, and what the programming actually shows. Romani media is heavily dependent on music/entertainment as opposed to the staff intensive field of news, interviews, and investigative reporting.²¹ For example, BTR's current programs, aside from 85 minutes of daily news, the rest is exclusively music videos and films. Although this may be an extreme example, it is also quite telling considering that the station was founded and runs on the mission of "educating our Roma people". (pc Dimov: 5 September 2003). Two thirds of the Romani media (MTV and Shutel being the sole exceptions) spend at least 2/3 of their time on the air playing music; these figures do not include the computer-generated night music broadcast.²² This point is not lost on the Romani audience, when asked what he would like to see/hear on Romani media Sushica Ajdin, a Rom who works in the hospitality industry from Skopje explained: "... *They should have documentaries. It needs to be more educational, especially for the children. It should include international news – information about the rest of the world. This will help promote and inspire our children to continue their education. This is not just me saying this; this is what every second Rom would say.*" (pc: 8 September 2003)

Based on his lack of political involvement and wealth, Ajdin does not believe that his opinion would carry any weight as he ended his statement by saying, "I would tell them this myself but it would have no effect."

²⁰ There is also an abundance of pirate Roma media throughout the country, particularly radio, which would benefit from observation/analysis.

²¹ When asked why people listen/watch their station 2/3 stated the mixture of music, information and education; only Radio Roma and Radio Ternipe believe they are listened to exclusively for their music.

²² On paper Radio Ternipe's programming is only 36 per cent music but as of October 2003 it has become 80 per cent music due to lack of funding and reduced advertising interest.

Public and Academic Discourse on Roma

“Roma have a different culture but they have been present in our society for so long that we feel that we know them. We know the differences but we have agreed that they have a right to live their own lives; to be different. They have very good symbiotic relations with other groups so there is no interest in studying them because it (the relationships/dynamics are) is not problematic...12 or 13 years ago a foreign researcher presented his research on Roma. He was so excited about his research and we tried not to laugh. We were all thinking ‘we know this already, why is he so excited about it?’ ”

– Professor Marija Tasseva, University of Skopje

We begin this section with a quote from Professor Tasseva not as a point of ridicule but as a point of resignation; there has never been a single Master thesis or PhD dissertation in the Department of Sociology at the University of Skopje written about Roma. There is no class on Roma issues in any of the state universities and there is only one Roma with a PhD, Dr. Trajko Petrovski, who is publishing works on Roma issues. Professor Tasseva along with Professor Divna Lakinska and Dr. Petrovski are one of a handful of academics that have written about Roma issues in the fields of: interethnic relations, poverty/education and ethnography, respectively. The majority of their work, with the exception of Dr. Petrovski's, is commissioned by international agencies and is more often known outside of the country than within. (pc: Petrovski 17 May 2004). This phenomenon of “the international community pushing Roma issues” but “complete absence within the Macedonian academic discourse” was reiterated by Professor Ilo Trajkovski, also from the Department of Sociology, who was recently recruited to work on projects addressing the sociology of poverty in rural eastern and south-western Macedonia for the World Bank. As Trajkovski stated, “...if you want to read current research on Roma in Macedonia you read things published by the international community, not the Macedonian journals.” (pc: 19 May 2004). Lastly, there has never been a state document drafted that directly concerns the needs of the Romani population in the Republic of Macedonia.²³

This is not to say there is no literature written by people from Macedonia regarding Roma - there is, it just is not commonly known nor sought after. Throughout the 1970's and 1980's the majority of literature written in Romani consisted of poetry from throughout the Yugoslav republics and in 1981 “Romani literature” appeared as a separate topic in the Macedonian National Library's card catalogue and was gone by 1982.²⁴ There was then a dearth of Romani topics (most often “Roma” or “Cigani” would be referenced only in Pushkin's work) until 1983 when Dr. Trajko Petrovski, at that time a student in the Ethnography department at the University of Skopje, published a mimeograph regarding Roma in Macedonia. Starting in 1996 one can notice an increase in the amount of literature published regarding Roma/Romani issues. The majority of the literature either addresses traditional celebrations (i.e.: “St. George's Day” known as “Herdalejzi” in Romani) or are studies commissioned from international organizations.

²³ The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy did appoint a person to accumulate, analyze and synthesize existing information about Roma in Macedonia and then draft a cohesive policy. The projected date for submission of the policy suggestions is October 2004.

²⁴ For an in-depth look at the use of Romani as a literary language within Macedonia please see V. Friedman's “The Romani Language in the Republic of Macedonia” *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 46, 1999.

When asked about this lack of interest in cultivating a scholarly discourse within the academy about Romani life and issues in Macedonia, both Tasseva and Trajkovski stated that, “we feel we know about the Romani community, why does there need to be work done on it?” When asked whether this knowledge is innate or intellectual both admitted it was innate and that the lack of interest may stem from the lack of Romani intellectuals publishing their work within the academic circles. When further pressed on the issue as to why non-Roma were not working on Romani issues Trajkovski stated, “we avoid talking about concrete things because there is a fear of perpetuating the stereotypes. It is a very sensitive issue, ethnic issues in general – there is a feeling of political correctness. This is not a new idea.” (pc: 19 May 2004)

There has been a shift in the academy in recent years to recognize inter-ethnic issues within the discourses of sociology and ethnography and as of 2002 a course on “sociology of ethnic groups” was included in the undergraduate sociological curriculum. Roma are not discussed as a separate issue but rather, “...under [specific] theme[s] i.e.: prejudice, assimilation processes, ethno-political representation and ethnic structure of Macedonia (demographics).” (pc: Tasseva 17 May, 2004). When asked whether Roma were handled as homogenous group in Macedonian literature and/or in their respective lectures both Tasseva and Trajkovski stated they spoke of Roma as a singular group, if they spoke of them at all. Lakinska stated that when she lectured about Roma it was usually when she was addressing issues of poverty.

Based on the lack of a “public face” of Roma, most of the research that is conducted (primarily based on international community’s initiative) takes place on an individual or familial level, for example this analysis. This has both negative and positive repercussions. Roma, as all people, are not monolithic. They are influenced by things on an individual, familial, communal, regional and state level. Their “culture” is a conglomeration of rituals that are also affected by these five levels. Yet because there is no one to “present” a Romani identity, and because this is what is sought after when conducting needs assessments, writing books or drafting policy – the individual Romani person/family suddenly becomes the *only* spokesperson for the “Romani nation”. Thus, Roma become stuck with the label of “weak ethnic identity” (Barany: 2002). That said, by asking individuals about their own cultural practices and identity it is possible to receive a less politicized opinion and thus allows the individual actor to have agency in defining themselves.

The Search for Romani Identity from Others

In addition to the “lack of interest” on the part of the academics and the state (mentioned above) Roma lack a *cohesive* public “presentation”. Such “lack” provides fertile terrain where “others” can create and reflect *their* (perception of) identity *onto* Roma (Maaluf: 2001). In literature, music and film, Roma are presented with the common stereotypes as either reckless wanderers or “free spirits” whereas in the public arena Roma are most often portrayed in their absence: absence of threat but also absence of interest. Although things have changed somewhat due to the increase in international interest, this information often does not trickle down to the “ordinary” people; none but the most involved of the Romani activists interviewed even knew that, in 2003 while prime minister, the current president spoke on behalf of the Macedonian Romani population in front of the Hungarian parliament and representatives from the World Bank and Open Society Institute.²⁵

²⁵ “I am proud of being representative of the country in which the Roma have perhaps the highest level of rights compared to all the other European countries.” Mr. Branko Crvenovski, former PM, current President of Macedonia

According to Ivana Kovacevic the way in which Roma are presented throughout Western literature tends to fall into two categories: “social realism” and “romanticism”; such motifs can also be found in ethnic-Macedonian literature. The 19th century genre of “social realism” portrays Roma as “nomads who have no interest in work”, and are “impulsive, criminals, beggars, outsiders, drunkards, stupid, dishonorable, lazy, liars, sub-human, hot blooded and explosive” (Djordjevic, Filipovic, Sociologija Romskog Identiteta: 2002, page 335). On the other hand, Roma were (and some would argue, still are) also a source of inspiration for Macedonian authors who often viewed Roma as the romantic antithesis: the physical manifestation of freedom. Although the two motifs of “social realism” and “romanticism” remained, Macedonian literature in the first half of the 20th century saw rise to a new role for Roma, that of the transmitter of ethical and social norms. This new role is manifest in both Vasil Iloski’s *Chorbashi Theodos*, where the Rom is portrayed as a judge punishing those who go morally astray, and Vidoe Podgorec’s *Beloto Cigance* where the social prejudices of the non-Romani society (towards Roma) rub harshly against the “father figure” who tries to teach and show his son the value of work, honesty and respect (Demir: 2002). In *Roma People in the Macedonian Literature, Music and Film* (Demir: 2002) Demir argues that, based on its larger audience reach, music and film have more of a potential social than that of literature. This offers little consolation as, again according to Demir, the representation of Roma is “completely skewed.” In music, Roma fill the role of “entertainers, bought for a small sum”, who are expected to bring magic into any tragic story. The role of Roma in Macedonian song lyrics is that of the “base” in human nature: they are the symbol of hunger, lust and misery. Such motifs are carried out in the visual realm as well; in Stoley Popov’s *Gypsy Magic*, alcohol, physical violence and shouting are omnipresent. The director was clear that his intended audience was not necessarily Romani; rather, Roma served as a “good story line” and were “interesting characters” based on their “culture”. Excerpts from this film were included in an anthology entitled “History of Macedonian Film” and utilized in cinema and art classes.

The interpellation of mass media into mass culture and vice versa has been widely recognized; as Hall states, “especially these days in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history”(Hall: 2002, page 3). Although Roma live in the Republic of Macedonia and are constantly mixing with all peoples of the macro-society, both Roma and non-Roma are *taught* to believe that they live in parallel worlds. Therefore many of the first “lessons” that non-Roma learn about Roma “culture” is through such cultural production as literature and especially music and film. Therefore although people’s perceptions of Roma are not necessarily positive, unlike ethnic Albanians and to a lesser extent ethnic Turks, Roma are not viewed as “violent” nor “destructive to the state”, which are macro-level fears; rather other ethnicities tend to have an “aversion” to Roma which is on a much more “personal” or rather, “micro” level such as: laziness, dishonesty and “lack of education”²⁶ (Kanev: 1996, Najcevska: 1999).

As stated in the previous section, the government has maintained a policy of “benign neglect” towards Roma left over from Yugoslavia. The statistics prove that such neglect may not be so benign. What is clear is that, according to Dr. Natasa Gaber, who is currently

²⁶ A 1994 survey conducted by Dr. Marijana Najcevska noted that 80 per cent of high school students in Macedonia have “negative feelings” towards Roma.

drafting the governmental national strategy, “there has *never* been a state policy regarding Roma in Macedonia.” (pc: Gaber, 23 May 2004) Since the public launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion on July 1, 2003 much more effort has been placed on trying to draft a state policy towards Roma particularly in the field of education, employment, health and housing. In a highly centralized state such as Macedonia, where the content of courses is completely dictated by the Bureau for Educational Development, a policy of “benign neglect” is the equivalent to de facto silence.²⁷

Romani Identity

“[a]fter a decade of mobilization, Gypsies remain woefully underrepresented in Eastern Europe’s politics. Their weak ethnic identity, infighting, poor leadership, the proliferation of organizations and the relative absence of ethnic solidarity...[has led to] a lack of unity...” - Zoltan Barany

We begin this section with a quote from Zoltan Barany, author of *The East European Gypsies – Regime Change, Marginality and Ethnopolitics*, the only book currently widely available regarding comparative (European) Romani politics. Although his research is quite in depth and takes into account “everyday people” along with political actors, it is our opinion that his argument is backwards. *Our interviews show that Roma do not possess a “weak ethnic identity” which leads to a weak political representation. Instead, weak political representation has perpetuated a public “weak ethnic identity.”* This is further strengthened when one examines the most common response to the question “what makes you Roma?” Answers ranged from “a feeling,” “speaking Romani,” to “be[ing] Roma means to respect the so-called Romani customs and traditions,” and every mixture in-between. Thus, according to Gjorgy Tonovski, author of the university textbook, *Sociology*, Roma would appear to fulfill all the sociological and anthropological requirements for “culture.” That said, international researchers and politicians alike, continue to bemoan a *lack* of Romani cultural identity.

Therefore, if one follows Ivana Kovacevic’s argument in her paper, “Sociology of the Roma Identity,” although the Roma we interviewed unequivocally would “classify” as a culture, we hesitate to speak about them in terms of Anthony Smith’s definition of “ethnie” or “nation”,

...[because] an ‘ethnie’ is ‘a group with a common name that has an origin myth, a common history and unique culture which is tied to a sovereign territory and solidarity’ so we can ask ourselves which conditions of the above mentioned are being fulfilled...[yet] When referring to cultural identity one of the basic elements when defining a nation is that of language and other aspects i.e.: value systems, customs, beliefs, myths, religion, areas of inhabitation, everyday practices and traditional professions... (Djordjevic, Filipovic, page 334)

In order to be recognized as an “ethnie” or “nation” one must have an audience to retell one’s common origin myth, proclaim one’s sovereign territory and demonstrate one’s “solidarity”. This differentiation between private and public means of affinity is further strengthened when one recognizes that all those interviewed feel they learned about their

²⁷ Except for a fledging initiative by Open Society Institute Macedonia on anti-bias training in public schools) there is no program to address the cultural gap between Roma and macro-society. (pc: Spomenka Lazarevska 14 May 2004)

“Romani identity” through their parents and community-based rituals as opposed to the educational system or domestic political participation.²⁸ In fact, although few interviewees cited the state as antagonistic to promoting Romani identity, many saw such antagonism in the Romani political parties. Put in another way, no one from the fifteen people interviewed believed the Romani political parties/politicians were representing, let alone addressing, the needs of the Romani population in Macedonia. As N., a middle-aged Romani woman from the mahala stated, “*They are only after their positions and functions and they would leave us poor people to die...*”

None, except the most ardent activists spoke of their identity as something they learned about in the public sphere, and those who did acknowledge the work of the international Romani movement or internationally funded NGO rather than that of domestic institutions. We belabor this point for two reasons: Macedonia is a new democracy and therefore believes in the concept, if not reality, of the state serving as the protectorate and the political parties holding access and leverage to the state, thus as large as the NGO sector may be, the ultimate power and clout is still believed to lie in the hands of the government. Secondly, because of the ethnically divisive nature of the state and the power of the political parties, there is a belief that *only* an ethnically defined political party would be *willing* to represent the needs, and open up space, for a given, ethnically defined, constituency. This point was confirmed by two unexpected sources: N. (mentioned above) and a high political representative within the Albanian political party currently in power. Both shared the same sentiment “*If we don’t help ourselves no one will help us.*”²⁹

As we have repeatedly stated, Roma, like all other ethnicities, are not a monolithic group. There are many differences within the Romani community and these are most commonly broken down in socio-linguistic or ethnographic terms³⁰ (Demir: 2002, V.Friedman: 1999). Although nearly all of those interviewed knew which “sub-group” of Roma they belonged to, and had opinions and value judgments about “their” group in relation to other “groups”, we believe there are other “sub-groups,” beyond an ethnographic definition, which are equally as important. Economic status, education level and region also heavily influence Romani internal means of self identification and their relationship to others. We argue that much attention has been paid to the dialectical differences between “Arli” and “Kovaci” dialects of Romani or levels of religious practice between “Dzambazi” and “Gjilanlija”; very little attention has been paid to viewing Roma as belonging to different social groups as opposed to a unified, and isolated, cultural entity (pc: Tasseva 17 May 2004, Trajkovski 19 May 2004, Lakinska: 2 June 2004).

²⁸ There is both a Turkish and Albanian department at the University of Skopje in addition to activities initiated and run by the NGO sector although according to “How Much Do We Know Each Other: The Other” the curriculums in both of these departments, in addition to that of Macedonian language and culture, are narrowly focused on their own ethnicity.

²⁹ Respecting the representative’s high political position we chose to leave the respondent anonymous.

³⁰ Arli (Erlji), Dzambazi, Barutci, Topaanli, Magjuri, Gilanlji, Gavutne, Kovaci (Bugurdzi/Arabadzii), Msri, Kcii, Konopari, Kurtofi, Cergari, Esnafi. Although Ashkali and Egyptians do not consider themselves Roma, many Roma and non-Roma do identify them as such. There is a belief that Ashkali and Egyptians have chosen to identify outside of the Romani identity because of the stigma attached to a Romani identity and also for socio-linguistic and/or political reasons. For more information please see E. Friedman 2002a, V. Friedman 1999 and Koinova, CEDIME-SE 2000.

Rituals, Customs, Values, Language, Religion... and the “Other”

Most of those interviewed recognized their “Romani identity” in terms of a “feeling” that had been “passed on by [their] parents.” This was explained in the common anthropological terms of religion/ritual, custom, values, language, and, most importantly, other people’s identification/reaction.³¹ Using the above rubric we analyzed the interviews to gauge which behavioral patterns were most commonly referenced, recognizing that these divisions are much more porous in practice than statements about them would seem to indicate.

Upon reviewing the information gathered through the fifteen interviews we can draw some loose conclusions. All of those interviewed:

- identified themselves as Roma and used the ethnonym to describe themselves and the cultural group in which they identified – although some did switch public ethnic identities during their life³²
- participated in a variety of common rituals and customs
- knew about a common set of cultural values, even if they did not necessarily subscribe to those values
- over half (eight) spoke Romani as their mother tongue, and three chose to learn Romani later in life

Religion/Rituals

“Most of all we celebrated Gjurgjovden...we used to sacrifice a lamb...with all the customs...four days and a big feast.” – “R”, 44 year-old woman originally from Shuto Orizari and now living in Ohrid

“When we go to the cemetery, if there is no one to read the ‘jasin’ (Muslim prayer for the dead) then I read it.” – “M.A.”, 20, Kumanovo

According to the 1994 census, 91 per cent of Roma in Macedonia identify themselves as Muslim. As with any ethnic group, the level of religiosity and practice varies depending on the family and the individual. In our research we found many people who fast during Ramadan whereas other members of the family do not or vice/versa. There is a belief among Roma that the level of Islamic religious practice has intensified within the Romani mahala of Shuto Orizari in recent years, coupled with an increase in conversions of Roma to evangelical sects of Christianity. This was confirmed by F., an 18 year-old Rom who was born in Shuto Orizari, moved with his family to Germany, and then returned to Shuto Orizari. Unfortunately there has been little academic study to confirm this.

Much attention has been written about the Roma’s “predilection” towards “religious syncretism” (Koinova, CEDIME-SE: 2000, E. Friedman: 2002 b, Demir: 2002).

³¹ We began this analysis with the assumption that discrimination would strengthen one’s Romani identity. However, what we found was a lack of recognition regarding discrimination unless people were educated in either the traditional sense or that of the NGO sector therefore the correlation is unstable; is a person’s identification as a Roma man or woman stronger because of the discrimination or the NGO activism or knowledge of how they, as a citizen, *should* be treated. What is interesting to note is that, although only six people identified instances of ethnic discrimination (in addition to two interviewees who stated that although they had not experienced it themselves, they knew someone who was discriminated simply because they were Roma) these people were inevitably more educated and/or active within activist circles.

³² As noted previously, M. does not identify as Roma but is identified as such by the Romani and non-Romani community.

The most commonly cited example of this is the importance paid by Roma in the Balkans to celebrating Herdalijze (Gjurgovden or St. George's Day). Our research confirms that out of the fifteen people interviewed, everyone except for M. who did not identify as Roma, celebrated Herdalijze at one point in their life.³³ Herdalijze is originally an Orthodox holiday that has been incorporated into the Romani community and is celebrated in a manner particular to that community. There is some debate as to whether the celebration of Herdalijze points towards the Romani community's "absorption" of the cultural practices around them or their lack of being "proper Muslims". Similar arguments are presented regarding the celebration of Vasilica, another holiday derived from the Orthodox faith.³⁴ According to E. Friedman (citing Aloui, Petroska-Beshka and Najcevska: 1999), "A characteristic of the Roma is that they do not abide strictly by the rules of the Muslim religious community and are very tolerant towards the religious beliefs and practices of others." (E.Friedman, 2002a, page 248). On the other hand, E. Friedman continues, "...some non-Romani Muslims in Macedonia claim that Roma are not really Muslim, with a survey conducted in 2000 showing that both Albanian and Turkish children in Macedonia see Romani children unlikely to go to mosque as adults." (E. Friedman: 2002 citing Najcevska 2000). Our research confirms that few young people attend mosque, but that there is a pattern of increased religiosity as people get older.³⁵ According to Ferki Demirovski, an hodja from Macedonia, this tradition is not unique to the Romani community but rather is prevalent among most Muslims in the Balkans, "Most Muslims in the Balkans attend mosque only on Fridays (jumma) and Ramadan." (pc: 1 July 2004). Many of the other commonly celebrated traditions are directly from Islam including fasting during the month of Ramadan and subsequently celebrating Bijram. Of those interviewed nine currently celebrate Bijram and six fast during the month of Ramadan; many of those who fast are over forty years old.³⁶

Participating in rituals does not equate to understanding and knowledge of one's religion, and social pressure to conform to the practices of the community should not be underestimated. Demirovski gives the example of Roma who commemorate the death of someone in the community (mevlud) and celebrate a child's circumcision.³⁷ As Demirovski explains, "If one measures the level of religious practice of Roma in Macedonia then they are often not in accordance with Islamic law. However, the Koran also states that one person can not label another person as Muslim or not Muslim (kaffir)." (pc: 1 July 2004). Many of those interviewed had neither read books about Islam nor attended mosque and few felt like they really "knew something about Islam." That said, our interviews shows that many of

³³ The two people who converted from Islam to evangelical sects no longer celebrate Herdalijze but remember doing so prior to their conversion.

³⁴ Only three of our interviewees mentioned that they currently celebrated Vasilica, although, prior to conversion, both E.A. and N celebrated Vasilica as well.

³⁵ It is interesting to note that over half of our interviewees mentioned that either they attend mosque or an older, male, relative in their family attends mosque, that said, no one stated that s/he attended mosque five times a day as required by Islamic law.

³⁶ Although Islamic law requires that one fasts during the month of Ramadan (and if, due to health reasons, they are unable to fast during Ramadan they must fast once well) in practice fasting is respected as a personal choice. It is not unusual to find families where only one person chooses to fast with the rest of the family supporting him/her.

³⁷ According to Demirovski, although Roma circumcise their male children, the manner in which the circumcision takes place does not conform to Islamic law. (pc: 1 July 2004)

those who identified themselves both as Roma and as a member of a religious community (either Muslim or evangelical) and continued to make the division when discussing the ritual practices within their home. As both our oldest and youngest interviewee, stated, “I feel both Roma and Muslim.” The verbal distinction points to the understanding that being Roma is neither synonymous with being Muslim nor incompatible with it. This point was reiterated once again when E., a middle-aged mother of two from Bitola, defined her beliefs as “A Muslim who eats pork,” but yet described how after the 2001 crisis, the increased tension between her (Orthodox) ethnic-Macedonian colleagues against the ethnic-Albanian population, broke down into anti-Muslim rhetoric. Her colleagues tried to differentiate that they were talking about “those” Muslims but she protested on the grounds that although she is not Albanian, she is Muslim as well.

Customs

One of the most commonly recognized customs within the Romani community is the extravagance of weddings and the role of the Bori. Weddings are one of the most easily recognizable and written aspects of Romani culture. (Petrovksi: 2001, Demir: 2000). Traditionally Romani weddings in Macedonia take place over four days although, according to both R. and M. (a middle-aged indigent woman from Stip), due to the overall increase of poverty within the Romani community, many can no longer afford to “make a wedding the way it used to be.” The weddings include hiring of musicians, a procession of the new Bori from the parent’s house to that of her in-laws and a huge feast.³⁸ Of those interviewed, seven had either “made a wedding” or were planning to “make a wedding” in the style described above. Of those who were not planning to “make a wedding,” one had converted to evangelical Christianity which demands modesty in all affairs and the others cited a lack of financial means to do so. It is interesting to note that F. does *not* want a traditional wedding, “...but it seems that I will have to...My parents want me to do it, the tradition...Every Roma does that...I have to do what my father says.” This points to another common value within Romani tradition, that of respecting one’s elders. This point will be further elaborated below.

Although literally translated as “daughter-in-law” the roles and responsibility of the Bori are much more nuanced than those one associates with the term in English. Traditionally, the Bori must move into her husband’s house. As R. and F.S. (a 44 year-old woman from Shuto Orizari) explain, a Bori is “*expected to take on the responsibilities of running the house, including cleaning, cooking and caring for the children.*” She may or may not work outside of the home (this tends to be either negotiated or dictated by the family) but even if she does, her responsibilities related to the upkeep of her in-law’s house do not diminish. She is also expected to answer to her in-laws in a deferential manner. Again, not all married Romani households choose to “have a Bori” in this manner, and this is not an exclusively Romani tradition. A Bori is also found in other households throughout Macedonia and is more common in those of lower socio-economic status. As Demirovski explains “...in the past, the practice was considered a traditional part of how one lives in married life, now the reason behind it is changing and the motivation is much more economic.” (pc: 1 July 2004). What is interesting to note is that the same practice takes place even within Roma families that are not Muslim (including Roma in other, Catholic or Orthodox countries) and, in our interviews, the role of the Bori is often seen as a traditionally “Romani” custom.

³⁸ There are also rituals devoted to proving the virginity of the Bori which will be explained in more detail in the next section.

Values

Many of the values which our interviewees mentioned break down into two categories: ways of showing respect and maintaining honor. Unlike other Romani communities in different countries, Roma in Macedonia do *not* practice the ritualistic separation of “clean v/ unclean” or “purity” so often used to describe Romani culture. (Mirga and Mruz: 1997, Koinova, CEDIME-SE: 2000) What is common from both our reading and our interviews is respect for elders and an understanding, if not an agreement, that a woman should be a virgin when she gets married lest she “spoils” the honor of her family. What is common in both these perspectives is the centrality of family and therefore the family’s reputation within the community.

Of those interviewed, over half mentioned respect for elders and four specifically mentioned that they *expect* either their future wife or daughters to be virgins on their wedding night. As F.S., *“I’m not stopping my daughter from going out but she will have to respect our customs and traditions...we will do all of the rituals of the first wedding night as they did it for me.”* Her statement points to the centrality of both “respect” (“I am not stopping my daughter from going out” – which demonstrates her belief that she *could* regulate her daughter’s activities) and honor (“we will do *all* of the rituals of the first wedding night” – all meaning publicly pronouncing her daughter’s virginity to the community) as a means of carrying on tradition (“as they did for me.”) It can be assumed that “they” are the older members of the Romani community. According to all the religions traditionally practiced in Macedonia both partners should be virgins on their first wedding night although culturally this standard is much more stringent for women. (pc: 1 July 2004). Regarding “showing respect” for elders, this was most often demonstrated within the family and was explained by E. (a 40 year old woman from Bitola) as regarding them *“as if they were sacred, although this did not mean they [the younger people] did not have rights.”* According to Demirovski Islamic law demands that a child respect his parents unless the parents are contradicting the tenets of Islam.(pc: 1 July 2004).

Many Romani activists and NGOs have attempted to combat the centrality of both “respect” and “honor” by repositioning the words into a context of “choice.” This has been met with mixed response. A.J., a 39 year-old Romani activist from Kumanovo, believes that the traditions surrounding virginity should be addressed by the Romani community and eradicated. What is interesting to note is that F.S. (mentioned above) is a member of a Romani women’s rights group that is fighting to eradicate the practice of making the bride’s virginity (or lack thereof) public knowledge. Many of those interviewed were not asked about their virginity (or that of their spouse) and yet, based on their age at marriage (13 – 18) one can assume they were married at a young age to ensure their virginity. It is also important to mention that 1/3 of those interviewed were not married and four delayed marriage until they were in their twenties; these people tended to have completed secondary school.

Language

Although a high percentage of Roma in Macedonia speak Romani as their mother tongue, ethnicity and language do not have a one-to-one correspondence (V Friedman: 1999). Romani activists/intellectuals offer conflicting statistics (60-99 per cent) although it is estimated that the real number of native Romani speakers is somewhere close to 80 per cent of the entire Romani population (Plaut: 2003, Koinova CEDIME-SE: 2000). The remaining 20 per cent of the Romani population speak Albanian, Turkish or Macedonian as their first

language.³⁹ Albanian is a regional language; Roma from Western Macedonia (most notably Tetovo and Struga) may speak Albanian whereas Roma from Central and Eastern Macedonia (most notably Veles and Stip) but also in parts of Western Macedonia (Tetovo) may speak Turkish. This was confirmed by those whom we interviewed; the two interviewees from Stip spoke Turkish (or a mixture of Turkish and Macedonian) at home whereas one of the interviewees from Tetovo learned Albanian through the educational system and the other one learned it when she became Bori and moved to Tetovo from Gostivar. The Roma who spoke Macedonian as their mother tongue were either from areas where Romani is no longer spoken, i.e.: Gostivar, or were from mixed marriages where the common language is Macedonian. That said, three of our interviewees learned Romani later in life and many had the desire for their children to learn Romani even if they do not speak it themselves.

Nearly all Roma in Macedonia speak Macedonian and the majority speaks two, if not more, languages. (V. Friedman: 1999). Fourteen of the fifteen people interviewed were at least bilingual and E., who grew up in Bitola speaking only Macedonian, is now taking private Romani language classes through an NGO. Multilingualism has a long history in the Balkans and, according to H., who grew up in Kosovo during World War II, every ethnicity in his village (of Serbs, Turks, Roma) could, and would, speak the other groups' languages.

Reflections of and to the Other

Operating under the assumption that one's identity is profoundly shaped by the reactions of other people, it can be assumed that those who have felt the most discrimination and continue to identify as Roma would have the strongest "Romani identity." This is not the case. Rather it appears that those who grew up in non-Romani neighborhoods have the easiest time *articulating* what their Romani identity is and those who have completed high school (with the exception of E.I.) have the easiest time *recognizing* discrimination but there was no quantifiable difference in how strongly one *identified* with being Roma based on the ethnic composition of their community. The only pattern that can emerge when analyzing the "strength" of a Romani identity is that of recognition – all those who could recognize they were discriminated against identified that such discrimination was based on their ethnic identity. As Maaluf states:

"...identity is not given forever...it's building and forming through-out our life: the elements which are in us from birth are few: sex, color...what essentially determines the [feeling of] belonging to one group is the influence of the other; the influences of the people closest to you: your parents, fellow citizens, members of the same religious group who are trying to adapt you to their ideal of what you should be and those who are trying to eliminate you for who they see you to be." (page 14, translated from Macedonian by Azbija Memedova)

Maaluf's statement resonates when one examines the story of E., a 40 year-old woman from Bitola. Although E.'s father raised her to be proud of being Rom, she could not articulate what that meant until: "*I was in 5th grade and the teacher said in front of the entire class that*

³⁹ "These figures fail to indicate another social phenomenon – many Roma declare another nationality and/or mother tongue in order to avoid the social stigma attached to them. Since the majority of Roma in Macedonia are Muslim, they tend to declare Turkish or Albanian as their mother tongue." (CEDIME-SE:2000) Of those interviewed only one, E.I. admitted to "hiding" his identity as a boy going to secondary school in Tetovo. He found it easier to allow the teachers to assume, since he was attending an Albanian language school (although he spoke Turkish at home), that he was ethnically Albanian rather than calling attention to his Romani ethnicity.

all Roma smoke...He said, 'even E. smokes.' I cried the entire day because it was not true...[to this day] I still have not lit a single cigarette just to prove that he was wrong." This statement, this public marking of ethnicity had a lasting impact on E. She was no longer a student, *she was a Roma and there were characteristics and behaviors which were ascribed to her simply because she was Roma.* Her response to such marking was that of crying (because it was not true) but subsequently doing the exact opposite of what was expected of her based on her ethnicity. Although we cannot draw definite conclusions from one story, we can see a similar pattern throughout the interviews. Those who were publicly marked as Roma were more apt to hold their ethnic identity as a strong component of their over-all identity. We are referring here to Mirga and Mruz's 1997 classification system, which, although interesting, is not completely relevant to Roma in Macedonia.⁴⁰

Being "marked" as Roma in Macedonia can either mean "looking Roma" i.e.: dress in traditional Romani clothes -- having their hair covered but not wearing chamija (hijab), wearing loose pants (shalvari) or in a "stereotypically" Romani fashion (i.e.: mismatched, poor or sloppy) -- or having darker skin (Mirga: 1997) and there was some correlation between those who "looked Roma" and those who demonstrated a "strong Romani identity." This however is too simple of an explanation for there are always exceptions and many of those interviewed who did not "look" Roma were very active in Romani activism and other public means of proclaiming their identity. Therefore we began examining more subtle means of being "marked" as Roma rather than one's physical appearance.

Another means of "marking" in this highly ethnically stratified society is through one's name. Roma in Macedonia overwhelmingly have, and give their children, Muslim first names. These names are marked as Muslim by ethnic-Macedonians but can be distinguished from Albanian and Turkish names by other Muslims.⁴¹

Another means of being marked is based much more on the personal events in one's life. As both Hall and Maaluf continually argue, ethnicity is an influence but it is not a definition of one's identity. What happens to a person on an individual level and how others respond to that person are just as formative. The people who moved from either the mahalas to an ethnically Macedonian or mixed (Albanian and Macedonian) neighborhood or vice versa, or those who traveled abroad (to Germany), and returned identified much more strongly as Roma than those who did not move. There could be many reasons for this, but if one defines "community" in its classic sense, then those who did not move never had to "be introduced" to the community. There was already an identity carved out for them through kinship: the son or daughter of so-and-so. (Tonovski: 2000). However, those who moved had to "present themselves" and were therefore "received" on the most easily recognizable (and socio-politically charged) feature, that of their ethnicity.

⁴⁰ Mirga and Mruz classify Roma identity as: belonging to the Romani community through blood; if your parents are Roma then so are you, secondly respecting the roles of purity, respect of elders, speaking Romani (and which dialect one speaks), accepting the rules and prohibitions based on age, gender, religion and familial relations, professions and (recognizable) physical characteristic/appearance (1997)

⁴¹ It should be noted that such distinctions are more difficult with Roma who live in heavily Albanian populated areas and therefore take on Albanian surnames.

What Roma Think Others Think of Them

“We, the Romani people have survived great hostility by keeping a safe distance from the society that surrounds us. Our culture adapted to the environment that surrounded us and nearly all the information available about us was misinformation.” – Gregory Kweik

Although there is a stereotype that Roma only live among themselves, nearly half of those interviewed were either raised in or moved to a non-Romani community. All but the most isolated of those interviewed (M and K.N.) had life-long contacts with non-Roma. These contacts spanned from informal (neighbors or trade) to strictly professional (cleaning the homes of ethnic Macedonians, attending an ethnically mixed or primarily Macedonian school and/or working with non-Roma as colleagues) to personal (having a best friend who is not Roma). Operating under the notion that one’s identity is consistently influenced by the perceptions and reactions of others, it is not surprising that, when asked how non-Roma perceived them, those interviewed responded with common and negative stereotypes. What is interesting to note is that the venom and complete separation that is often used elsewhere to characterize Roma and non-Roma relations was often absent when discussing the relationships between ethnic Macedonians and Roma. There is, however, both a (growing) fear and tension between the ethnic Albanians and Roma. We did not ask about other specific ethnic groups.

In general, the Roma who were interviewed divided the non-Romani perceptions into three categories: personal characteristics, social-political characteristics and relations with ethnic Albanians. The relationship between ethnic Macedonians and Roma is often considered “generally good.” This was reflected by those whom we interviewed as well. Although slightly more than half of those interviewed had either experienced discrimination personally or knew someone who had, there was little animosity expressed towards ethnic Macedonians, particularly when compared to how Roma spoke about ethnic Albanians.⁴²

On a personal level, most Roma believed that non Roma viewed them as “lying, stealing and dirty.” As D., a 21 year-old Rom from Stip explained, *“if a store was broken into, everyone would go and accuse Roma.”* These specific characteristics were mentioned by nearly half of those interviewed. It is interesting to note that such sentiments parallel the common portrayal of Roma within Macedonian literature, film and music (see above). There appears to be a circulation and reflection of stereotypes: Roma recognize how they are being portrayed in the larger cultural field and therefore interpret that as the common sentiment held within the larger society. Those interviewed also mentioned the constant “underestimation” that non-Roma have towards Roma with respect to intelligence and overall ability to “function” within the larger society. As E. from Bitola explains, *“Roma, all the time, were with the Macedonians. Roma are voting for Macedonians and they are closer with Macedonians than they are with, for example, Albanians. Macedonians in some ways love Roma because they are good people, peaceful people and loyal people. But, should we be proper? A Macedonian person could not stand to see a Roma person as better than them,*

⁴² The term “Gadje” literally means “Non-Roma” (plural) and is used as an adjective to juxtapose the society into “Roma” and “non-Roma” spheres. That said, in common vernacular “Gadje” tends to refer to the majority non-Roma population. Therefore, in Macedonia, ethnic Macedonians are “Gadje” whereas Albanians or Turks are “Chibane” and “Horahani,” respectively although all ethnic groups are “non-Roma.” It is interesting to note that none of those interviewed used the term “Gadje” during the course of the interviews whereas the derogative term for Albanians, “Shiptar” was used in at least five of the interviews.

to know more than he/she does, to be more worthy, to be in a better position than he or she is...A Macedonian loves you only if you are under them. Because he knows that in this way you are going to serve them in a certain manner."

The Roma interviewed also believe that non Roma view them as poor and uneducated thereby easily manipulated in the larger social-political sphere. As F.S., a middle-aged woman from Shuto Orizari explains, *"They think we are at the end of the line; all the others are before us."* It is understood that "they" in this sense is the macro-society and, more specifically, those who have the power to "give." This statement recalls the previous discussion regarding ethno-political representation and the need to "fight for your own" or risk being ignored. There is also a growing identification with poverty and a lack of education. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth exploring if this identity is either surpassing that or shaping a larger "Romani identity."

It is commonly noted that "Roma are better off in Macedonia than in any other country in the region," and we do not contest this statement. However, we believe that such a declaration does not take the heterogeneous nature of Macedonian ethno-politics into account. Although the majority of Roma and ethnic Albanians are both Muslim, religion has not brought the two communities closer and in fact a 1994 Gallup poll on social distances demonstrated that ethnic-Albanians feel a "relatively high" level of animosity towards Roma. "To put it into context, the [ethnic-]Albanians aversion towards Serbs and Jews was higher...but lower towards Macedonians, Vlachs and Turks." (Kanev: 1996, cited in E. Friedman 2002b)⁴³ Such animosity is felt, recognized, and at times shared, by the Romani community. According to N., a 45 year-old woman from Shuto Orizari and those interviewed from Kumanovo (an area that until recently was known as the "conflict region"), things were made worse by the influx and differentiation in state treatment of Romani and Albanian refugees from Kosovo.

The division between the personal and the political is an artificial one. As we have demonstrated throughout this paper based on past discrimination, Roma did not have access to the means of power within Macedonian society. A significant proportion of Roma are under-educated, living in poverty and therefore have little interest in the political sphere. Therefore, following the pattern established by the macro-society, they turn towards their (ethnic) political representatives who have failed to craft a public image worthy of respect in the turbulent and nationalist world of ethno-politics. In turn, although Roma were granted significant legal rights and representation, the words have remained empty. There is still no place for Roma to learn the "game" of ethnic politics nor have they created a new, public, political alternative.

"Roma are a heterogeneous category both historically and geographically. Their diversity should not be seen as a disadvantage but it does cause disunity and incoherence which is a

⁴³ It is worth noting that this poll was taken before the 1999 NATO bombing in Kosovo where both Macedonian Roma and ethnic-Albanians tend to have close family. It is commonly believed within the Albanian communities (of both Macedonia and Kosovo) that Roma participated in the burning and looting of ethnic-Albanian homes in Kosovo, although there are no numbers to support or refute this opinion. Following the mass return of ethnic Albanians to Kosovo there was an intense campaign of retribution unleashed on the remaining minority communities (mostly Roma and Serbs). Currently 75 per cent of the Kosvar Romani population is either living outside of Kosovo, missing or killed.

problem seen when perceived from the need of unified political actions. Actually more Roma, based on their own interest, are being closed in their own mahalas or tribes, families, and within this narrow framework they tend to manifest their influence.” (Ivana Kovacevic, Sociology of the Roma Identity, page 334)

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