

## **THE ROMA COMMUNITY IN ALBANIA. THE ASSIMILATIONIST TENDENCIES DURING COMMUNISM AND THE RECENT SITUATION**

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*Roma community in Albania is thought to be located around the XV century. There is uncertainty on their arrival in the Balkans. Roma community in Albania is treated as second-class citizens with few opportunities of integration. Today the situation of the Roma community still remains poor and has a lot of challenges. The researcher through this study aims to recognize us on Roma community in Albania, the Albanian perception through personalities in different historical periods. For this study are used historical documents, the archive materials whose opinions by scholars as well as comparative analysis of studies on this field. Throwing light on the study of assimilation trends seeks to establish a clear picture of the situation of Roma in the communist system, which misinterpreted at times. Albania's communist system did not deny the right to education, to vote, to work, but did not recognize them as a minority ever. Participation in informal activities was provided supplementary income and privilege compared with other groups but they remained unformed part of society. Only few people from Roma community who have completed higher education levels during communist period are well and their status relative to the Albanian population grew steadily improved.*

**Key words:** Roma community, totalitarian system, assimilation, perception, rights

### **Roma community in Albania**

Some Roma families, according to Croatian sources, should have come in the Balkans over the century. XIV<sup>1</sup> and placed on Albanian territory over centuries. XV<sup>2</sup>. During the Ottoman Empire, the Roma community, as well as the majority Albanian population, was converted for economic reasons or forced to Islam religion. If the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, Roma were traded as slaves, while the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary foster forced assimilation of their Roma community in the Western Balkans, although they treated them as the population of "second-class", they coexisted peacefully with groups other ethnic

and can pass freely borders. Koinova explains this with the fact that Roma community were only one of the numerous printed minorities on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire<sup>3</sup>

Albania's declaration of independence in 1912 was followed by a relatively better treatment of the Roma community<sup>4</sup>, although the social gap between Roma community and non-Roma population continued to exist<sup>5</sup>. During World War II, almost half a million Roma community people from different countries of Europe were executed or killed in Nazi concentration camps<sup>6</sup>.

In Albania, the treatment of Roma community people was relatively good and there were no concentration camps or ethnic cleansing<sup>7</sup>. However, some Roma community people actively participated in the National Liberation War supporting partisans.

In the socialist period (1945-1990), Roma community people had improvements in housing, education, health care and social services. As Albanians, they enjoyed full employment, although some of them were working as unskilled workers<sup>8</sup>. In villages, they worked in agriculture and farming. While in the cities, the Roma community people worked in construction, public services and handicrafts<sup>9</sup>. In addition, when economic activity private, especially after the Constitution of 1976, condemned by the law, many Roma community people continued the small business<sup>10</sup> which included the purchase of horses, of articles of crafts and other products, which they bought in the city and sold in the country and vice versa, playing the role of mediator between urban and rural areas<sup>11</sup>. Participation in these informal activities was provided supplementary income and privilege compared with other groups. Consequently, their status relative to the Albanian population grew steadily improved.

During the transition period, posts-communism, Roma community people, following the collapse and closure of state-owned enterprises, professional sided character of their low education and discrimination, passed from relative prosperity to extreme poverty. They are currently the poorest ethnic group and most marginalized in Albania<sup>12</sup>. Poor and very poor families cope with high levels of social exclusion, because they are not able to cope with daily necessities and less likely to be participating in processes that affect their lives individually, such as: employment and education. Although the Roma community population has been historically the poorest in Albania, the decline in the standard of living during the post-

communism transition was much faster than for some other population groups. This has created a vicious circle which reproduces illiteracy and low education level among Roma, which further deepens their marginalization in society.

On the other hand, post-communism transition directed to a market economy and democracy created opportunities for Roma community people to organize to express their identity and protect their interests. Starting from 1991, a number of NGOs were created in Albania, as Amaro Dives, Amaro Drom, Romani Baxt, Alb Roma, Roma Integration, Romani Kham, Disutni Albania, Roma woman, Roma North, Heart Mother, Active Albania etc. Some of them have local character, are fragmented and spread in certain groups or Roma tribes. However, some Roma were elected as councilors<sup>13</sup> in local government (Elbasan, Korça, Delvina, etc.). Despite participating in various political parties, Roma community people lack of direct representation and have no representatives in the public administration to protect their interests and needs.

### **Albanian perception for Roma community people**

What are the opinions of other researchers, Albanian historians and Albanian anthropologists for this social group? In his "Albanian craftsmen<sup>14</sup>", Faik Konica talks about the formation of the Albanian cities in the Middle Ages and writes that "despite non-Mohamed communities were also groups of Gypsies (Gypsies) divided into two categories: nomadic gypsies or gypsies originating from India (region of Harigiri, state Katiawan in India), and no itinerant gypsies (magypt) originating from Egypt, Sudan, resident, typically, the periphery of the cities. In "Albanian Race"<sup>15</sup> we find this discussion: "The gypsies and gipsies are members of indide race. First called gypsies or even magypt. It seems that as in all Balkan region, also in Albania are distributed through Ottoman Empire. They do not pass nomadic life, but are located in different cities usually live in separate neighborhoods divided by Arbëresh population)." Historical Studies in the scientific journal No.2, 1975<sup>16</sup>, Nathaniel Andrea quotes the historian researcher Costas Ebiri "Roma and gypsies, ethnography and history of the Gypsies" and in his note no.25 writes: "Egyptian original, -slip gypsies, Egypt, and roman (gypsies) are of Indian origin.

In his book "Years of childhood", author Enver Hoxha writes<sup>17</sup>: "... They are not of Egyptian origin, but Indian. They have migrated in westward with large groups at the time of Genghis Khan, even before that time". Further he writes: "According to a French historian, the word Gypsy does not come from Egypt, but from the Greek "IFTEST" that apparently could be linked to a locality in Peloponnese ... We in Gjirokastra call them "qifto". And in one of his speeches he said<sup>18</sup>: "... But when we say that they have come from northwestern India, let's be clear: it comes to 1500 years or 1,600 years before, so in ancient times."

As stated above, it appears that there is some confusion in the use of names for gypsies social group. As to Sami Frashëri, Jakov Milaj, Andrew Nathaniel, Costas Ebiri used denomination gypsy, Roma, magypt interchangeably between them as synonyms. At his "Albanian Handicrafts" Konica denominates them gypsies and uses it as a synonym for naming magypt, gypsy and it is also used as a synonym for Roma. This is a wrong use, because its meaning is not known. As explained above, this word is synonymous with the word gypsy/magypt. Incorrect use of that is still visible today in the daily life from Arbëresh population for this social group from India. They still use these terms: gypsy, magypt, Roma. A lot of researchers highlight the origin of Egyptians (magypts) that is from Egypt. We find this highlight at: Sami Frashëri, Faik Konica, Prof. Dr. Alexander Xhuvani Çabej, Costa Ebiri, and the Albanian Academy of Sciences in 1980 and dictionary in 1984, relying on popular opinion. As noted above Enver Hoxha says that their origin is from India. Two scientific distortions are observed in the statements: 1) language, according to him, the word gypsy doesn't come from Egypt, but from the Greek "iftos"; 2) Historical: according to him, the gypsies are of Indian origin. But we stated above that denomination magjyp/egyptian comes from the name Egypt came, which in Latin and in Greek is aegyptius. Did Enver Hoxha correct those scholars of Albanian language?! The word "iftos" as Gjirokastra dialect "qifto", that is a pronunciation of the first word, just reflect the pronunciation of Egypt in Greek language, and not a locality in the Peloponnese. He is inconsistent in his statements in timing of migration of Egyptians migration: time claims for time Genghis Khan, once a more ancient time, here 1,500 or 1,600 years before. This is proof that the policy of the communist regime against Roma and other minority language was not based on accurate information or coordinated efforts.

### **Assimilationist tendencies**

Communist totalitarian system in Albania has tended assimilation about Roma population. This is shown on documents collected by researchers (E. Osmanaj registry 150 of the Albanian National Archive). After numerous studies and browsing the archive materials of the state there was a total lack of information about the Roma community. Roma population not only were not considered as a minority but never had the right from Albanian state to learn and study in their language. Roma population is described by the United Nations as a linguistic minority and it obliges all countries where Roma live to ensure those rights as a minority. This never happened in Albania. Here, Roma population always was considered as second-class citizens, it showed residences, schools, ordinary jobs which they were designated and waited.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>David Crowe, John Kolsti, *Albanian Gypsies: The Silent Survivors*, in Crowe and Kolsti eds. , *The Gypsies in Eastern Europe*, (Armonk, New York: Sharpe, 1991), pg. 124

<sup>2</sup>Maria Koinova, *Minorities in Southeast Europe: Roma of Albania*, Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME), 2000, pg. 96

<sup>3</sup>Maria Koinova, *Minorities in Southeast Europe*:, pg. 125

<sup>4</sup>ERRC, *Një rast i panjohur: Romët në Shqipëri*, 1997, pg. 56

<sup>5</sup>Maria Koinova, *Minorities in Southeast Europe*:, fq. 135

<sup>6</sup>Dena Ringold, Mitchel A. Orenstein, Erika Wilkens, *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle*, A World Bank Study, Washington D. C. , 2003

<sup>7</sup>Idem 6

<sup>8</sup>Isabele Fonseca, *Among the Gypsies*, *The New Yorker*, 25 September 1995

<sup>9</sup>Bujar Taho, *Document on the Situation of Roma in Albania*, 2002

<sup>10</sup>Hermine De Soto etj., *Roma and Egyptians in Albania*

<sup>11</sup>Courthiade M., Duka J., *A Social and historical profile of the Roms in Albania. 1990s. A draft paper provided by the authors*

<sup>12</sup> Hermine De Soto, etj, *Poverty in Albania*

<sup>13</sup>CRS., *Project “Roma Participation in Local Elections 2007”*, *Successful Roma Model of Political Representation*, Tirana May 2007

<sup>14</sup> Faik Konica: “ *Esnafët shqiptarë*”

<sup>15</sup>Jakov Milaj, *Raca Shqiptare*, Tiranë, 1944, fq. 127

<sup>16</sup>Andrea Nathanaili, *Studime historike*, Nr. 2, Tiranë, 1975

<sup>17</sup>Enver Hoxha: “Vitet e vegjëlisë”, Tiranë, 1983, fq. 291

<sup>18</sup>Idem 17

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