

ROMA DIVERSITY, DYNAMICS OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AS THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE EDUCATIONAL LIFE OF ROMA CHILDREN IN ALBANIA

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Abstract:

Historically, in Albania, as in other European countries, Roma people have had very low levels of education. Nomadic traditions and distinctive ways of living, poverty and discrimination are some of the main factors that explain this situation. In the 1930s of the last century, describing the Roma nomadism, Hasluck noted that they sometimes "settle in a city for a few months", but then turned back again to "tent life". In these circumstances, the education of children was something difficult. In the life of Roma, Gypsy and pilgrims - everything is about the family. It is the basic unit of social structure that makes up family groups; it is an economic entity in which work is done and a solidarity environment related to work is found; as well as an educational unit that ensures the fact that society reproduces itself and provides security and protection for the individual. In a world of change and unpredictable situations, the family is a feature of sustainability, synonymous with stability. The family is not simply the gathering of individuals within it; is a whole with its rights, an organ composed of members of the family, in solidarity to other families and foreign. Through qualitative method this study will identify the importance of the Romani family in the life of Roma children. The aim of the study is to observe how the relationship within family affects the educational life of Roma children and all relationship within the community.

Key words: Roma community, family, diversity, dynamic, social structure, education

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Roma diversity and organizational features of their life in the community

Roma people live in Albania for more than 600 years (Fonseca I., Among the Gypsies, *The New Yorker*, 25 September 1995). They came in Albania before the Ottoman conquest. From the conducted studies, it is assumed that they came from India, then through the Balkans to Europe. Their origin is not known due to accurate historical evidence, but mostly from linguistic analysis. At the era of the Ottoman occupation for security reasons, Roma have changed their religion to convert to the Muslim. During the World War II, Romanis in Albania were not persecuted in the death camps as happened in many countries of Eastern Europe. After WWII, the Albanian government pursued a policy of assimilation and homogenization of the Albanian nation, considering this community as part of the Albanian population.

In the socialist period (1945-1990), Roma community had significant improvements in shelter, education, health care and social services. Like the Albanians, Roma enjoyed full employment, despite some of them worked as unskilled workers (Fonseca I., Among the Gypsies, *The New Yorker*, 25 September 1995). In villages, they worked in agriculture and livestock. While in the city, Roma citizens worked in construction, public services and handicraft (Taho B., *Document on the Situation of Roma in Albania*, 2002).

In addition, when private economic activities, especially after the 1976 Constitution were punished by law, many Roma carried on small businesses, which included the purchase of horses, craft items and other products they bought in the city and sold in village and vice versa, playing the role of mediator between urban and rural areas (Courthiade M., Duka J., A Social and historical profile of the Roms in Albania. 1990s. A draft paper provided by the authors). Participation in these informal activities provided supplementary incomes and were privileged in comparison with other groups. Therefore, their status, relative in comparison to Albanian population, became to progress.

During the transition post socialist period, Roma people, because of the collapse and closure of state-owned enterprises, low education and discrimination passed from relative prosperity to extreme poverty. They are actually the poorest and the most marginalized ethnic group in Albania (De Soto H., Gordon P., Gedeshi I., Sinoimeri Z., Poverty in Albania. A Qualitative Assessment, The World Bank, Washington D.C., 2002). Studies have shown that their poverty is almost two times higher than the Albanians and this

situation has been worsened (According to studies, approximately 75% of Romani families are "very poor", while the Albanian population this figure is 28.8%. The Roma community is distinguished by two extremes: 80% of households rated as poor and very poor, while a minority of 5% has a relatively good economic condition). Even though Roma population has historically been poor in Albania, the decline of living standards in post socialist transition was much faster than some other population groups. This has created a vicious circle which reproduces illiteracy and low level of education among the Roma, which deepens their marginalization in society.

As a result of the created poverty, with minor exceptions, a new generation of Roma children is unable to attend school to be work hard for their families. Roma children have become beggars and victims of various trafficking and prostitution. At present, the economic situation of Roma in Albania and living conditions are very poor due to unemployment that is several times larger than the rest of the non-Roma population. Health and shelter conditions are very bad. Today it is estimated that the growth rate of the Roma population is 3%, which was higher than that of the Albanians (Decade of Roma Inclusion, the National Action Plan 2009-2015, Tirana, 2009). Roma population live in almost all areas of the country. However, the largest number of Roma is concentrated mainly in Central and Southeastern Albania: Tirana, Durres, Elbasan, Fier, Berat, Korca, Pogradec, Bilisht, Gjirokastra, Delvin, Kruja, Shkodra etc. Roma live either in major cities, mostly in separate neighborhoods or villages near the cities.

Roma in Albania are known by different names. In the north, they are known as gypsies, in the south as arixhinj (gypsies) and in the southeast (in Korce, etc.) as kurbatë (Marcel Courthiade, gypsy meaning "foreigner", while naming "kurbate" connecting it with the Turkish word kurbet, ie. emigration). Despite the names, Roma have played a role not less important in society.

Roma are organized in groups or tribes that can be distinguished from each other by the time and route of their arrival in Albania; from their socio-economical professions, the lifestyle, customs, language, dialects, etc. They are Mëçkar, Karbuxhinj, Cërgar (Rupan and Skodrara), Bamill and Kurtofë (Courthiade M., Duka J., A Social and historical profile of the Roms in Albania; De Soto H., Gedeshi I., Dimensions of Romani Poverty in Albania, Roma Rights, Number 1, 2002, Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, Hungary; Barjaba K., Recent Implications of Inter-Ethnic

Relations in Albania, Anthropological Journal on European Cultures, Vol. 4, Number 1, 1995) who form, according to Liegeois's expression, a mosaic of diversified groups (Liegeois J-P., Tsiganes, La Decouverte, Paris 1983).

Meçkar are the Roma's second largest tribe, and most well integrated and located for centuries in Albania. They represent about 32 percent of Roma and were located mainly in the field of Myzeqe. At present, they are in Fier, Lushnja, Vlora, Berat, Tirana and Durres. Meçkars are traditionally involved in agriculture and livestock (Milaj J., Albanian races, Tirana 1943), a profession that is rarely encountered in the Roms of the Balkans. Courthiade and Duke notice that their language has many borrowed words and various dialects of Albanian language, which shows that they are braided for a long time in Albania before being fixed in the actual settlements (Courthiade M., Duka J., A Social and historical profile of the Roms in Albania. 1990s. A draft paper provided by the authors).

Karbuxhinj (self called Erli) are the largest tribe and represent about 51 percent of Roms. The word "Erli" comes from Turkish and means "local resident" or "not nomadic". They migrated from Turkey and Greece to Albania during the exchange of populations in the 1920s of the last century between Turkey and Greece (Hasluck M., The Gypsies of Albania, Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society, 17 (2): 49-61, 1938). Courthiade and Duke notice that their language is archaic and has more Turkish borrowings than that of the Albanian language. Located mainly in the region of Korca, then they migrated in direction of Pogradec, Elbasan, Tirana, Durres and Fushe-Kruje. Their traditional occupations have been buying-selling of horses, crafts and mainly birch working.

Cergar migrated from Montenegro and Serbia and settled in Shkodra during the 1920s to escape Yugoslavs attacks (Kolsti J., Albanian Gypsies: The Silent Survivors, in Croë and Kolsti eds., The Gypsies in Eastern Europe, Armonk, NewYork: Sharpe, 1991). Men's occupation was mainly with the sale of horses, while women's with divination. (Taho B., Document on the Situation of Roma in Albania, 2002, AT, Magjypët of Shkodra, Leka magazine, N. 7, 1943). They now located in Tirana and Durres.

Bamills are a small group of Roma, who came from Ioannina (Greece) in the years 1945-1946 together with Cham refugees and are mainly located in Zinxhiraj Gjirokastra and in Levan, Fier. They were tinsmith and made kebab, pots and caldrons for rakia, profession that have been saved until nowadays.

While Kurtofs came in the years 1930s of the last century from Bitola Macedonia and settled in Fier. Some of them continued to be semi-nomadic even during the socialist period.

Research method used

In this study, it was used the qualitative methods as the most appropriate, because the study has to do with understanding of the 'inner experiences of subjects' and 'forms of social interaction' between them and society, seen through the point of view of representative participants and based on 'cultural understanding' that they give these experiences (Joseph Silverman, Marc Hindry, *Diophantine Geometry: An Introduction*, (Springer-Verlag, GTM201, 2000), p. 89).

The analysis of secondary data, as the second phase of the study, focused on reviewing and examining of the literature on theoretical and practical context, has included studies, reports, assessments on the situation of Roma education in Albania. Qualitative methods of data collection in this study helped to explain the reason why Roma children are less educated than the rest of the children, describing the present situation in a natural way.

In the focus of the study were the parents of Roma children (their mothers and fathers), who in some cases were also introduced as grandparents, despite of their young age. The number of people engaged in the focus was a group of 39 participants, of whom 21 participants were women.

The study was conducted in five cities of Albania. The selected districts were: Tirana, Fier, Elbasan, Korca and Berat. The main reason for the selection of these cities was based on the high percentage of Roma population in these areas, without leaving aside the fact that the Roma community is more organized in these areas, and finally based on the geographic location of these areas, which gives us the opportunity to expand the study geographically (Census, INSTAT, 2011). Sampling has been such that it can provide answers to research questions raised by the researcher. The sample is a subset of the study population to answer research questions. Usually samples in qualitative research are smaller than in quantitative research (Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, Routledge, 2007, p. 143).

The results of the study

The study showed that an important factor was migration and emigration, movement within the country and abroad, which is seen to have taken place during the transition to the 1990s of the last century. These chaotic

movements which have emerged from economic reasons "for a better life" as define by the parents themselves in the study, has negatively impacted not only the educational lives of children, but also the community itself, which until the '90s resulted to be more educated than today. In other studies is shown that parents leave their children with grandparents or with mothers and leave to neighboring countries to provide better economic income for their children (Karaj T, Adem Tamo, Education Situation, 2007, p. 42).

After 1990, the Albanian population began to emigrate massively to Greece, Italy and further. In this context, even Roma individuals and families immigrated. Greece and Italy represent the most frequent destinations for them. Studies show that when Roma men migrate, their children were left behind in the care of mothers or grandparents; but they came out of control, left school or dealt with work to provide personal or family incomes. Almost the same was the situation of those who emigrate as a family. Children interrupted school and went abroad to the families. Overseas they are not involved in any educational activity (Karaj T, Adem Tamo, Education Situation, 2007, p. 54). This clearly emerges in our study: Roma children in case they would be registered in kindergartens or in schools. They constantly move and this causes difficulties in registration into another school or /and lack of control by governmental institutions regarding the control that they can make on the situation. Furthermore in the study it is clear that Roma themselves encounter difficulty when returning home and have difficulties to enroll their children to school, because the registration procedure in civil institutions is long and has high costs for them.

Another finding of the study is the marriage at an early age Roma and such phenomenon which affects more girls, who as stated by the parents but also by teachers and representatives of education, are less educated and fewer in number in terms of education. Roma marry early and it mainly makes girls leave school at a very young age to gain a new status, that of a woman of the house. Besides the negative consequences on physical and psychological health, marriage at an early age deprives girls from education and qualifications and reduce the perspective of their employment opportunities (ERRC, Submission to the Joint CEDAW-CRC, General Recommendation /Comment on Harmful Practices: Child Marriages among Roma, 9 September 2011). This finding is also supported by the findings of other studies in this field. Roma children, especially girls, leave school at a relatively young age because of early marriage, or for

some prejudice of their parents. This one comes as a result of patriarchal beliefs according to which girls should not be associated with the boys when they reach the first years of adolescence, and schools were regarded as places where this unwanted socialization will occur. However from the beginning of fifth grade, many girls are kept at home because their parents want them to get married, so from fifth grade to eighth grade there are not Roma girls in school (UNDP, *At Risk*, p. 27).

An important discovery of our study was the role of the community in education of Roma children. The study has emerged a very interesting finding, the discrimination within group. Roma themselves are biased to one another when it comes to education of children, especially girls. According to them, an educated girl is not worthy for their community. This directly affects the disconnection of girls from school. It is also noted in the study that the girls are not considered as important as boys.

Hygiene is another finding of our study. Many Roma parents understand the reason why their children unlike from the majority of population, prefer not to socialize. According to them, the low level of hygiene in their children is due to the poor conditions where they live, lack of detergents for washing, drinking water shortage, etc., affect socialization. Lack of hygiene is observed even by educators and teachers; as this is often an obstacle to the socialization of Roma with the rest of the children. Teachers are often found in difficult situations, when asked by parents of non-Roma children, that their children should not sit with Roma children in the same bank. In other studies, hygiene is not included on the obstacles of Roma education, but is treated as a problem of the community in general. The presence of toilet inside the house is another useful indicator to assess the living conditions of Roma families. Lack of toilet inside the house is another major problem, because the lack of drinking water can bring to the spread of various infections (UNDP, *At Risk*, p. 46).

The low education level of the Roma parents themselves is another finding of the study. A Roma parent not only have a low educational level and in most cases they are not literate, but characteristic is the young age of some parents who have brought to life their children. In other studies is emphasized that the low educational level of parents and low perception of the benefits of education is another obstacle in the education of Roma children (Ilir Gedeshi, Hartësimi, p. 39). It is known that many new mothers are children themselves and they lack every kind of knowledge concerning the upbringing of children

(Hermine De Soto, Beddies S., Ilir Gedeshi, Roma and Egyptians in Albania: From social exclusion to social Inclusion, The World Bank, Washington DC, 2005, p. 89). Inadequate literacy and education of the mother-child today affects children's education tomorrow. The survey findings also showed that language problems faced by Roma, are more pronounced in compulsory education, mainly for those Roma who have not attended preschool. But Roma children who attend preschool have trouble communicating in Albanian with other children and educators, who have difficulty in understanding these children. In this context, the conducted studies emphasize the linguistic difficulties faced by Roma in several large Roma communities: children talk more among them in Romani. Consequently, many of them have difficulties in first grade, being taught in Albanian language, which encourages them to leave school.

Recommendations for Roma parents

- Roma parents as legal responsibilities to their children based on the right to education that every child has a constitutional right, must exercise their parental responsibility and to provide their children the necessary education.

- Roma parents need to iron barriers raised by them and become part of the educational lives of children, giving them the right support in the realization of this important process for life and their social integration.

- Exclusion of Roma children by parents, in performing difficult and detachment from the banks of the school, remains certainly a big responsibility of Roma parents.

- Professions such as begging, washing car windows in the street should not be considered professions from parents for their children. They should not force these children to exercise such professions getting disconnected from school.

- Parental engagement should be higher for children to attend preschool education as a very important process for their ongoing education.

- Roma parents should support their children by cooperating more with teachers and school administrators; cooperation should be at higher levels.

- Roma children are eligible to enroll in the civil registry offices without exception. This remains an obligation for Roma parents, who for various reasons do not register children becoming a major obstacle even for the attendance of different educational cycles later.

- During travels within the country or abroad, it remains the duty of parents to enroll their children in schools where they go and make the separation of children from actual schools, while not distracting children from school.

- Early marriages of Roma children must be restrained by parents, as this remains a major obstacle to children, who marry at an early age. Parents should not force their children to marry at a young age against their will.

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