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THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS FRONTIERS: THE CASE OF REPENTED ROMANIAN ROMA MIGRANTS LIVING IN A BELGIAN CITY

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ABSTRACT

In the last half of century, a great number of Roma in Eastern Europe have converted to Pentecostalism. This new and fervorous religious engagement is seen by scholars as a transformative one, as a modern ethnogenesis, or as a rediscovery of ethnic identity, a process that can either engender trans-ethnic discourses or ethnic exclusiveness ones, depending on local particularities. In this paper, I explore this process by looking at the interplay between ethnic and religious frontiers. Otherwise stated, I inquire into how the ethnic dimension of certain identity frontiers is being utilized, appropriated and reinterpreted in the religious discourse and everyday practice. Through an ethnographic example of repented Romanian Roma migrants living in Belgium, I discuss how notions of tradition, custom and origins are being reinterpreted and gain religious signification. Furthermore, by questioning the idea of being born again, I show that, although conversion brings important changes in the lives of my interlocutors, it is also a process that instills tensions between the old and the new ways of doing things, between the old self and the new one.

KEYWORDS

- *Roma*
- *Pentecostalism*
- *Repentance*
- *Conversion*
- *Identity*
- *Ethnicity*

1. Introduction

Another cold, cloudy Sunday morning of November in the Belgian city of Flemond[1]. It also sounds like November because I am surfing through different vibrations of heels hitting the slippery ground, of tires aquaplaning and of vibrant tiny water drops disintegrating. I am heading towards the neighbourhood of St. Marcus, to the Catholic Church I've visited last week, in order to pin the Romanian flag on their 'brotherhood' panel. On it rest maybe 30 different national flags like Belarus, Colombia, Congo, and India, but not the Romanian one. I decide to take an alternative route and not the usual, straight-lined way. At a certain moment, I cannot help to notice the tingling sound of my missed Romanian language coming from a Romanian

1 All the names of places and persons have been changed in order to preserve the privacy and integrity of the persons I interacted with.

Roma. He is talking to his wife and son while entering a room at the ground floor of a 'not at all out of the ordinary' building. There's nothing that would indicate that this garage looking building, having only a few small windows at the superior side of its grey front wall, would shelter the house of God, a church, except for the sounds that spring from it. I can distinguish an electronic piano and an accordion, along with different low and high tones of voices singing and shouting "Alleluia" and another strong voice that preaches enthusiastically about God. This was the first encounter with the migrant community of Romanian Roma living in this Belgian city, their church and, one might say, their sound. My first intuition was to say that this was a Pentecostal church, the association I've made between the loud music and the open and direct calling addressed to God, being done almost instantly without giving it much thought. However, throughout the paper the term used to designate it will be "*repentance",* the members of the church being *'repented'*[2]. These were the terms used by my interlocutors while the term Pentecostalism only surfaced when I asked a direct question:

> Me: *I understood from some of the people here, that this is in fact the Pentecostal religion.*
> Brother John: *Yes, for my inner peace and for the hope that I will be alongside Jesus in God's Kingdom I am in this religion.*
> Me: *So, what then, does 'repented' mean?*
> Brother John: *This comes from repentance: a man that repents each day for the wrong doings that he has done in front of God.*

The two main concepts which stand as a base for the overall interpretation are Pentecostalism and Roma ethnicity. The former is of particular interest because of its astonishing evolution. This 'young' religion has surfaced at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is now a cultural revolution of Western origin with more than 500 million worshipers outside the West and with 9 million new '*convertis*' each year. Jean-Paul Willaime supports the idea that Pentecostalism has to be conceived as a nebula, a regulating concept through which different groups show their religious belonging, a network of local churches without a central authority but who regroup under supra-local organizations, a Protestantism that emphasizes emotional religious experience *hic et nunc* compared to doctrinal statements and any liturgical tradition (Willaime: 1999). Robbins (2004) shows that the image depicted in the available literature on global Pentecostalism is one of a schism between theories that link Pentecostalism with Western domination and cultural homogenization; and those that mention the transformative power of indigenous appropriation. This last aspect will be further explored through this paper because, as Robertson argues, the identity of Pentecostalism could be found in its "glocalization" (Robertson: 1997) - that combination of a global meta-culture with a certain local particularity (Anderson et al.: 2010).

Concerning the Roma topic, first we must acknowledge that it is not an *a priori* one, but one which is constructed in situations of interactions, in the practices and discourses of ordinary citizens, of the organizations of the so called civil society and

2 My translation from Romanian for *'pocăinţă'* and *'pocăit'*.

institutions (Legros: 2010). In the past few years we have witnessed shifts in how Roma are publicly viewed, discussed and framed (Sigona and Vermeersch: 2012), turning from the 'Gypsy' image to an 'Europeanization' of the Roma (Sigona and Trehan: 2010). Also, the Roma have become more or less an experimentation ground for future policies but also a legitimation instrument for the EU's governance, with substantive funds being directed towards the implementation of these policies.

Moreover, the above mentioned shifts are just one side of the coin, the Roma minority undergoing major changes also in what concerns their religious affiliation. In the last half-century, Pentecostalism has become on the most important religious orientations among the Roma (Marsh & Thurfjell: 2014) with estimates of over 1 million converted Roma in Europe (Atanasov: 2011).

Therefore, having as a starting point an ethnographic incursion into a community of Romanian Roma migrants, the purpose of this article is to bring forth a more nuanced picture of the transformations in ethnic identity that were brought by this religious conversion. Considering ethnic groups, as Barth did (1967), to be categories of ascription and auto-ascription by the actors themselves, having the characteristic of organizing interaction between people, and frontiers as the overt signs that people utilize to describe themselves and others, what they consider to be relevant in specific social contexts, my interest is directed towards the interplay between ethnic and religious frontiers. Otherwise said – I ask how the ethnic dimension of certain identity frontiers is being utilized, appropriated and reinterpreted in the religious discourse and practice and what how does this process translate into the lives of my interlocutors.

After going through some methodological aspects, in the subsequent sections, I will first bring some theoretical clarifications for the ideas of ethnic and religious frontiers, after which I will briefly explore the migratory context and the religious one of the Roma in general and the community in Flemond in particular. Through ethnographic descriptions, I will further show how ethnic origins and traditions are being transformed and reinterpreted in the religious discourses and practices. I will address the important aspect of the tensions that this process of conversion and of reinterpretation brings in the lives of my interlocutors. Moreover, I show that being in a migratory context is one of the reasons for the rise of the "difficulty of repentance" (as my interlocutors say). The homeland becomes the place of true repentance, and it becomes more difficult for the Roma migrants to keep up with all the religious precepts.

2. Methodological Aspects

After several failed attempts of following questions like space appropriation or economic pathways in a migratory context, the encounter with the religious community was the one that guided the rest of the research. For 7 months I have attended almost all of the religious services that were held every Thursday, from 6 PM, and every Sunday from 9 AM and also from 6 PM. Furthermore, multiple encounters outside the church: in the neighbourhood, in parks, on the street, at the local bar, visits at the homes of several Roma on different occasions like suppers or prayer evenings, at the flea market, at the doctor's office, at the municipality office - complete the ethnographic fieldwork.

Having the religious aspect as a central point of focus, the basic methodological premise was always to be aware of the fact that understanding a religion is only possible when there is recognition of its absolute value for the believers. This kind of approach is the methodological theism proposed by Maurice Godelier, to which he adds the epistemological agnosticism. The latter, to which I fully subscribe, is the idea that the researcher does not have to convert to the studied belief system, even if he considers them to be true, serious beliefs (Godelier: 1996).

Additionally, as Ruy Llera Blanes notes in his article concerning "the involvement of personal beliefs and attitudes in anthropological theory and practice, and their consequences not only for the production and publication of scientific knowledge but also for the construction of personal relationships and social interaction during ethnographic practice" (Blanes: 2006, p. 224), I have also found myself confronted with the question of personal religious belief and that of conversion. At the beginning, I was under constant pressure from proselytizing[3] discourses coming from different 'brothers'. I have presented myself as a student of anthropology having an interest in the importance of the church – in order to write and submit my dissertation. The subject of my research raised little or no interest for the majority of my interlocutors, much more important being my 'religious' situation, and sometimes the more pragmatic approach – that of the "how are you going to support your family with what you are doing". Therefore, from a religious point of view, I have presented myself as being raised in the Christian Eastern Orthodox tradition, but I didn't found myself anymore in its teachings and practices. However, I had great respect for their religion and was keeping an open heart/mind towards different ideas or experiences. Further along the fieldwork, mostly in the later stages, I decided to adopt yet another approach – more precisely – accepting a disciple/apprentice relationship where "one advanced or mature member mentors another" (Stanczak: 2006, p. 857).

An important aspect that needs to be mentioned here is that this research has a gender bias – taking into consideration that the majority of interaction has been done only with men. Starting off with a preconceived idea that the Roma women are generally reluctant to discuss such matters with an 'outsider man' like myself, I didn't engage in many conversations with women. Also, all the preachers were men. By acknowledging this limitation, I am also pointing out to the need and importance to further explore women's perspective regarding the religious and ethnic frontiers.

3. Religious and Ethnic Frontiers: Some Theoretical Clarifications

Before exploring the ethnographic case, some theoretical clarifications about the notions being utilized need to be brought forth. The point of departure of this analysis can be traced to the constructivist theory developed by Fredrick Barth in his famous introduction of the volume that he edited in 1967, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. His reflection permits going beyond describing manifest forms by questioning the processes through which ethnic groups are formed

3 As Ruy Blanes notes: "preaching the gospel to everyone possible is not just a matter of choice, but in biblical exegesis a moral obligation of the believer and demonstration of commitment to the church" (Blanes: 2006, p. 228).

and become relevant in social life. Identification with a certain category is an ethnic one when it classifies the person on the basis of his most general identity – which is supposed to be determined by his origin and his past (Barth: 1967). However, we cannot speak of objective differences between two groups – only of what is relevant for the actors themselves; while ethnic categories can be relevant for the behaviour or not – they can explain the entire social life or can be relevant in specific situations. Thus, the important element that remains is the dichotomization itself, that can be understood through two elements: the signs, the overt features, that are openly presented in order to mark identity[4]; and the orientation of basic values – more accurately put – the morality and excellence standards through which performance is judged (Barth: 1967). We can explain the continuity of the ethnic group, seen as an ascription and auto-ascription one, through the maintaining of frontiers: the cultural content might change, the cultural features that signal the frontier might change, even the organization of the group might change – what is important is the frontier, the dichotomization.

We can also speak of a 'Barthian debate' because this theory has aroused many other reflections and critics. I will briefly address some of them, those which will enrich our theoretical lens. Therefore, we have the Marxist critique presented by Talal Asad – regarding the neglect of the role of the state and the power relations between different groups and institutions (Asad: 1972); the fact that the notion of identity creating boundaries does not fully explain the ethnic identity[5] (Vermeulen and Govers: 2000); and Barth's focus only upon a system of dichotomization[6] (Jacobson: 1997). Also, Sandra Wallman (1978), in her article about social differences and differentiation, points out the fact that in an industrialized city, like the one presented here, the frontier systems are much more complex than the ones from a rural context. The city offers its inhabitants more reference groups to belong to or to be excluded from; the speed of change is much greater. Furthermore, she mentions that the consistency and the efficacy of a frontier varies in regard to the congruence with other frontiers (Wallman: 1978).

In a more general sense, ethnicity is an aspect of social relationships between social actors who consider themselves and are considered by others as being culturally distinct from the members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interactions (Martiniello: 1995).

Another central concept used throughout the paper is that of religion. In this case, I rely on the definition given by Talal Asad, who believes that the formula[7] used by Geertz to explain the religious symbolism is too simple. More precisely, Talal

4 For example, clothing, language, architecture, way of life etc.

5 Even though boundaries may create identities, these are not necessarily ethnic identities – that's why the authors add a genealogical dimension to this theory;

6 Here, in writing about the social identities of Asian migrants, the author states that the patterns of identification are of greater complexity that the one showed by Barth – since individuals locate themselves in relation to several kinds of social boundary;

7 Geertz's definition: religion is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Geertz: 2004, p. 4)

mentions that there are "not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power - ranging all the way from laws (imperial and ecclesiastical) and other sanctions (hellfire, death, salvation, good repute, peace) to the disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, school, city, church) and of human bodies (fasting, prayer, obedience, penance)" (Asad: 2002, p. 119). I will however retain an interesting aspect of Geertz's work, more precisely the fact that for the anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self and the relations between them – on the one hand the model of aspect and the model for aspect on the other (Geertz: 2004).

When addressing the relation between these two concepts, religion and ethnicity, Safran's view is of help, for he states that "the boundary that marks the terms in which an ethnic group expresses itself and makes political demands may be language or religion" (Safran: 2006, p. 29). Religion and ethnicity have been two of the most important categories that have forged our history and our way of understanding the world. But, as M. Martiniello (1995) puts it, it is very hard to arrive at a general theory of the relationship between ethnicity and religion, given the complexity and the diversity of empirical cases Also, before the seventies, the two dominant views, the functionalist and the Marxist ones, both predicted the decline of these social phenomena - these being approached as reminiscences of irrationality, as an illusion that masks the class relations, in a world more and more constructed on reason, on rationality (Tremblay: 2012). This was soon dismantled by the actual historical events that showed not only that these phenomena didn't disappear but also they were revitalized and took different forms.

4. The Roma and Their Migratory Context

The Roma are one of the largest ethnic group in Europe, summing up, although it is not very clear, to more than 10 million individuals in Europe[8]. Vitale et al. (2008) refer to the Roma today as being a "galaxy" of minorities without a common history, culture, or religion for that matter. They go on to mention that we are in the presence of a mosaic of ethnic fragments, a "diffuse", transnational and dispersed minority and not a territorial one. One which is a victim of the modern conception of the state which links place with culture, thus limiting the possibilities of being to just a few (Vitale et al.: 2008). Thus, these 'minorities' do not have any country which is their own, they are generally not covered by bilateral treaties, they are often one of the most vulnerable group, lacking backup from any particular state that might place abuses against them on the international agenda (Eide: 1998). The 'Roma issue' is important also because many Roma still belong to the poorest, most segregated, most discriminated and least 'integrated' populations in Europe, their chances for socio-economic mobility continuing to be extremely low. In this regard, some Roma have sought recourse in geographic mobility.

8 The Council of Europe provides an "average estimate" of Roma in Europe of 11,166,500, with upper estimates of over 16,000,000 – see http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/default_en.asp, under the tab: Statistics).

Recent studies have shown that the salience of the Roma and their migration as a critical issue of EU policy has never been greater than today (van Baar: 2011). At a political level, Roma migration in Europe has been addressed predominantly through the discourses and practices of integration. Yet the political measures taken in relation to Roma migration have often ensued practices of expulsion (Vermeersch: 2011). Neoclassical perspective on push-pull factors has shown that poverty (Castle-Kanerova: 2002), discrimination and nomadism – as a cultural trait used in media discourses – cannot fully explain Roma migration. Rather, their migration strategies were shown to be embedded in social ties characterized by reciprocity and trust (Pantea: 2013). Other research stressed the similarities of Roma migration with other Eastern European populations, like the desire to improve the quality of life (Vlase and Preoteasa: 2012) and the high degree of mobility (Nacu: 2011). Roma migration seems nonetheless to be distinguished by a particular conception of the family which shapes a migration organized around nuclear families and not individuals (Matras: 2000). Furthermore, research shows how the representations of the Roma shape and justify the policies that address their migration and integration (Plésiat: 2010). This type of inquiry also mentions that the Roma are regarded in Western countries as a threat to resources (Crowe: 2003) and that they have been stereotypically portrayed by media and by government representatives along the notions of deviance and nomadism (Sigona: 2005). Studies focusing on dwelling structures such as 'campi nomadi' in Italy (Picker: 2011) or 'villages d'insertion' in France (Legros: 2010) emphasize the exceptional regulation that these have been subjected to – such as spatial delimitation, heightened police presence and stringent bureaucratic criteria for residence. They describe authority actions in terms of policing, over-controlling and fingerprinting (Stewart: 2012). Moreover, reports by NGOs and international organizations claim that exclusion, poverty, processes of discrimination and stereotyping continue to be a reality that the largest European minority is facing today (FRA: 2012).

Returning to the proposed ethnographic case and the Belgian context, we find that very few academic research has been carried out concerning Roma migrants in Belgium. Earlier studies have shown that, across different historical periods, the relation between the Roma and the Belgian institutional structures has been a rather tense one (Reyniers: 1993). The number of Roma migrants in Belgium was estimated in 2012 at 20000 by the NGO Foyer (2012). Even if it represents only 0.2% of the total population, reports show that this number has mobilized important institutional resources (Pauwels et al.: 2012; Office des Etrangers: 2012). Moreover, the Belgian National Strategy for the integration of the Roma (2012) does not offer any data for the French-speaking part of Belgium. The available institutional reports mention that Roma migrants make their living from a combination of small trade and entrepreneurial practices, social welfare, or begging activities (Pauwels et al.: 2012; Clé and Adriaenssens: 2006). Furthermore, some run the risk of being expelled[9] because of their irregular status as migrants. Their circulation from the country of origin towards Belgium is not necessarily a direct one. People use their social networks to arrive in different

9 The 2012 report of the Office des Etrangers shows that Romanians represent the third largest group of repatriated migrants - for more details please see: https://emnbelgium.be/sites/default/files/publications/2012_fr.pdf

cities in Europe and then they might change city or even country due to various socio-economic or political reasons, with alternating periods of peregrination and stability (Reyniers: 2003). Other institutional reports mention that the number of Romanian migrants in Belgium has increased 5 times since Romania's EU integration, reaching in 2013 an estimated number of 50.000 (Centre pour l'égalité des chances et lutte contre le racisme: 2013). Also, 2014 represents a turning point for Romanian and Bulgarian migrants due to the lifting of prior work restrictions[10]. More precisely, a work permit is no longer required for employment in Belgium. As a result, the legal status and the job finding process have changed considerably. These details paint a heterogeneous image of Roma migration in Belgium and of the different situations in which their nationality or ethnicity might play an important role.

We thus we arrive closer to the explored ethnographic case, the one in the city of Flemond. From multiple discussions with religious and non-religious members of the community it was made clear that the first Romanian Roma to settle here have done so in the 1990-1995 period and that they originated especially from the west part of Romania. Today, the majority of Roma in Flemond is still originating from the same geographical region, more precisely the counties of Arad, Timis, Caras-Severin, Maramures, Satu Mare. Also, the exact number of Roma residing in this city is not very well known, with numbers ranging from 200 to 500 families.

5. The Repented Roma

In order to better understand the interplay between ethnic and religious frontiers, let us first become acquainted with the religious environment – the church and the religious service – because this was the most important space where these frontiers were constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed.

The first service each Sunday is scheduled to begin at 9 AM, followed by a second one at 6 PM. Each service consists usually of 3 hours of preaching, praying and singing/playing/listening to religious music. The first interaction with the religious community was by waiting outside for the 9 o'clock service to end, so I could ask the pastor if I could witness the religious service and also tell him the reasons for my presence there. Although I created a rather large wave of suspicion between the persons who were there and witnessed the interaction, the pastor, a really impressive man in posture but with a very soothing smile, wearing a navy blue suit, greeted me with a charming *bănăţean*[11] accent and welcomed me to assist in the afternoon service. Thus, at 6 PM sharp I entered the church for the first time. Previously knowing very little of this religion and its practices I am quite surprised of the image that lies before my eyes. First of all, it is nearly empty – the only members present are Alin[12], who is playing the electronic piano, and his mother. He is singing the song *I suffered for you up in Golgotha*[13]. Between the almost blinding white walls lay two distinct rows of chairs,

10 For more details please see: http://www.emploi.belgique.be/defaultTab.aspx?id=4886

11 *Banat* is the historical name of the western region of Romania;

12 The 'resident' singer – with very few exceptions, Alin was present there at each religious service;

13 This is a *transnational* song that can be found in different Pentecostal churches, also in Romania and Hungary (for more details see (Lange: 2003, p.4).

separated by a central lane. This lane separates more than the chairs – it can also be perceived as a gender separation line between the women, on the right, and men, on the left[14]. Though not very large, the church can hold a maximum of 80, maybe 100 persons, seated and unseated. In front of the chairs, on the left side - on the 'men's side', lay the musical instruments, the microphones and the sound equalizer. I settle down and I wait for the rest of the members to arrive and for the service to begin. Little by little, the room fills with the voices of over 50 Roma men and women, the sound of the Romani language and the reinvigorating laughter of children. As they enter, after giving the usual form of greeting – "*Peace*" – and before getting seated, a short on the knees prayer is silently whispered. Music is always accompanying the movement around the room and now Alin is being joined by three other players: one with an accordion, one with an alto saxophone and one vocalist. They have taken their places near the wooden front pulpit that has engraved on it two hands joined like in prayer. There are no crosses, no icons - the only thing 'covering' the walls is a large brownish watch – often looked at during the service by the preachers so that the different stages of the service are done in time. It is half past seven and the service has begun. The majority of men wears a suit, while women have long, 'under the knee' skirts and they all wear head kerchiefs.

We all rise in a unanimous movement and listen to a few sung verses from a Psalm, after which the preacher begins pronouncing a small excerpt from the Bible and interprets it literally. He talks about the tongue, this ambiguous human organ, which can be used to sin, to disgrace God but also can be used for worship, prayer and singing to God. After this, he assigns the 'band' and several other members to sing a few songs to God and the church enters into a common prayer with all the members present praying out loud, thanking God, requesting His blessing and forgiveness. The sounds of voices and movements of bodies reach very high levels of intensity in the last part. After every such overwhelming moment, the preacher asks the participants if anyone has received a *manifestation* of any kind from the Holy Spirit. This sequence is usually repeated three times during the service. At the end of the service, the believers are asked to bring forth their personal 'causes'[15] and, if there aren't any, administrative topics are discussed[16].

The case of Roma people, regarding the religious aspect, has a rather peculiar history. From their arrival in the middle ages until the 19th century, the souls of the Roma and, consequently, their salvation have been generally ignored by the established religions (Cozannet: 1973). Kenrick and Puxon (1972) mention that one of the important facts in the hostile attitude towards the Roma, historically speaking, was that whoever passed the frontier with the Turks were suspects – they were infidels, enemies of the secular state and of the church. A widespread intolerance was instituted because of the lack of conviction in their practice of established religions. In South-

14 Also, the type of chairs is different – on the men's side they have a light grayish-yellowish brown leather, while on the other side the chairs are of light-brown wood with a burgundy upholstery;

15 My translation from Romanian: '*cauze*' - this is a term very often used to describe a personal need, a demand, a difficulty, a lack, a problem of any kind that the individual addresses directly to God with the trust that in this way, he will attend to its resolution;

16 The most frequent one in this case is the constant remainder of the payment of the rent for the church;

East Europe, the Roma were regarded as a fundamentally non-religious group – which added to their rejection and misunderstanding.

In Eastern Europe, the Roma have begun their Pentecostal conversion process at the end of the 70s (Lange: 2004). This can be seen as one of the most successful religious movements in history - the converting of the Roma around the world to the Christian faith. The movement experienced a remarkable growth under the leadership of a French Assemblies of God minister by the name of Clement le Cossec. This *gadjo* pastor became the pioneer leader of the Roma Pentecostal movement in France as well as in many other countries around the world. Le Cossec selected young Roma men, taught them to read and write, and prepared them for ministry to their own people (Atanasov: 2011). Thus, through transnational kinship ties and through missionary work, we are looking today at more than one million (see Atanasov: 2011, p. 357) converted individuals. The Pentecostal conversion among the Roma is an astonishing phenomenon which has modified the way of living and of being of the Roma, like in the case of the Evangelical Church of Philadelphia in Portugal where it has diminished the conflicts within the community and those with the local populations (Rodrigues: 2006). In this sense, Rodrigues (2006) speaks of this religious engagement also as a cultural, transformative one. Furthermore, scholars coming from different backgrounds and geographical areas, address the issue of Romani Pentecostalism as a process of modern ethno-genesis (Delgado: 2014), as a "rediscovery" of ethnic identity (Strand: 2014), or as a process that can either engender trans-ethnic discourses or ethnic exclusiveness ones, being thus dependant on local particularities (Ries: 2014). Thus, in the following sections I will further explore these ideas by looking at the everyday experience of this transformative process.

6. Reinterpreting Tradition

Starting off from one of Hervieu-Léger's works, *La religion pour mémoire;* in which the main thesis focuses on the fact that no society, even the ones inscribed in the most advanced modernity, cannot, in order to exist as such, fully give up the thread of continuity that is expressed in one form or another through the "authorized memory" that is tradition (Hervieu-Léger: 1993), I would like to further interrogate how does this thread of continuity is constructed in the case of the religious Roma.

The formal invocation of a continuity of tradition is essential for all the established religions because this continuity permits the representation and the organization of the institution – these being placed under the control of a power that is authorized to affirm the true memory, the true filiation of the group. This filiation makes the member of the spiritual community similar to past, present and future members (Hervieu-Léger: 1999). Therefore, let us take a look at certain elements of tradition encountered in the sermons, but also in informal discussions.

Very often in the religious discourses, we find the advices (although they sounded more like demands) given to the congregation to follow the ritual, the stages of the ritual that are the same in all of God's churches. I have asked multiple preachers and believers to describe the motives for the order in which the religious service must be conducted – more precisely why there must be three sessions of prayer intercalated

with religious songs and preaching. The answers were diverse but the pattern that emerged was twofold. One of them was the "because we have to, because this is the tradition" answer that refers to a particular manner of doing things that is inherited not necessarily from recent past generations but from the generation of Christ, as it is written in the Sacred Texts. The other one linked the religious ritual with similar ones performed in other churches.

The frequency and very often high intensity of these demands to follow the ritual stem from the fact that although the service is scheduled to begin at 6 o'clock, I have never attended one that begun at the designated hour. This issue surfaced in preachers' discourses as a sort of nostalgia for 'the old times' when all the brothers gathered and started at the right hour. The recurrent tension between the actual practice and the tradition that had to be somehow embodied by the believers and the fact that the majority of the church members were 'young' in terms of their conversion, can be linked to an ongoing process of constructing or inventing a tradition. Eric Hobsbawm (2000, p. 1) considers the latter "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past". Thus, the constant requests to follow the ritual and the tensions that arose from this issue between the members of the church, show that 'inventing' a tradition is a slow moving and tensioned process. One that takes a lot of effort, especially from the part of the main actors: the preachers and the pastor.

Additional to what I have presented above, a distinction between tradition and custom must be brought into light here in order to better comprehend certain aspects of the discourses presented. "Custom is what judges do; tradition (in this instance, invented tradition) is the wig, robe and other formal paraphernalia and ritualized practices surrounding the substantial action. The decline of custom inevitably changes the tradition with which is habitually intertwined" (Hobsbawm: 2000, p. 3). Certain customs are also being re-appropriated through the religious discourse. For example, in the week that preceded one of the most important celebrations – the Resurrection of Christ – many of the discourses were referring to this event and on one occasion the Pastor mentioned:

> Pastor Mani: *Do you remember the time when the three women walked towards Jesus's tomb, on the second day after his death? But on their way, they were greeted by Christ who told them that he was no longer there. You know that we, the Gypsies, used to have the same custom. When somebody died, on the second day, the women would go to visit the graveyard."*

We can see here how a Roma custom, whether it existed or not, is given a religious signification – it links the present with a Roma past which, even though it wasn't Christian, still had customs similar to the Christian ones practiced today.

You might also notice the verb *"remember"* at the beginning of his phrase – this is also another aspect[17] I found to be present in virtually all of the religious discourses when talking about biblical events. Apart from what I have mentioned earlier regarding

17 Alongside with other expression like: "in the times before"; "in the old days"; "do you remember when Jesus...?";

the creation of a link with past generations, I think that this kind of utterances are mechanisms embedded in a process of appropriation, of internalization of a memory, an external memory – with events, people and dates – one that is located in the Bible. Also, almost like ethnographic descriptions, many of the biblical events are voiced using the present tense, this making them very actual, very tangible. We can go even further and link such utterances with the idea of performative language explored by Austin (1962) in his work *How to do things with words*. Thus using such words is one of the ways of performing a particular memory, of performing and creating a tradition.

7. Reinterpreting Origins

The origins of the Roma were also a recurrent theme in the religious discourses employed by my interlocutors. Most of the times, the idea of origin was used with the purpose of coating it in a religious connotation. The topic of the Roma people as being the chosen ones, appeared in almost every sermon:

> Brother Nicu: *God has chosen our Gypsy people*[18] *from the times of Canaan. From Curtici he has taken a family, from Resita*[19] *he has taken a family and so on. We are blessed.*
> In addressing this idea to another member of the church he replied:
> Brother John: *Well, what he meant was that God has chosen the entire Gypsy people from all around the globe. God has found his pleasure in us, the Gypsies, and that means the lowest stratum.*[20]

This kind of discourse is similar to the one presented by Paloma Gay y Blasco in her article regarding the Roma diaspora – more precisely fact that "the converts of Jarana look to the past to claim that all Gypsies are Jews that became lost during the forty years of exile in the Sinai desert. As Jews, the Gitanos are a chosen people who now, through their conversion to Pentecostalism, are about to fulfill God's plan for humanity." (Gay y Blasco: 2002, p. 184-185)

We see in the above ethnographic excerpt that there is a connection between the low social status that Brother John believes the Roma have and the divine choice. This is not unusual in the case of the Pentecostal religion – and the most obvious example of that are the first members of the church in the 1900s. Most of the Azusa Street converts, like the majority of converts in Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, were people migrating from villages to cities, people from the lower part of the social class scale, or people from rural areas who have seen their worlds rapidly modifying through social change (Robbins: 2004). However, as Tatiana Podolinská shows when talking about the Roma in Slovakia, this theory of deprivation that considers religious conversion as a response to social, ethic, ethnic or economic impoverishment, has its limits and does not cover all the particular human instances (Podolinská: 2014).

Another aspect discussed in the sermons is that of the origin of different skin tones. Brother John explained it to me with a strong religious connotation – more

18 My translation from Romanian: "*neamul nostru tiganesc*"

19 These are two towns in the Western part of Romania from which many of the Roma in Fermont originate;

20 My translation from Romanian: *"Dumnezeu si-a gasit placerea in noi, in tigani si se cheama patura cea mai de jos* »

precisely – linking it with the sons of Noah who fathered the different skin tones that we see today. What is surprising regarding this statement is that I find it very similar with one of the numerous slanders that have been attributed to Roma during their history: "in 1530, Agrippa[21] wrote: "These people from the area between Egypt and Ethiopia, descendants of Chus, son of Cham, son of Noah, still carry the curse of their ancestor" (Kenrick and Puxon: 1972, p. 32). Thus, in the above presented case, it seems that what used to be a prejudice, what used to be an ascription done by an outsider to a questionable, negatively charged religious origin, has been appropriated today by means of the Pentecostal religion into a positive, explanatory and, might I add, empowering statement.

Another aspect relevant to the reinterpretation of origins is that of the way in which Romania – the place of origin of the Roma here – is approached. The frontiers that people, during the religious sermons, but also very often in informal discussions, use to describe their homeland, are also given a religious connotation. Thus, 'at home' is seen as a place where, although some of the people are wealthy, the majority is actually very poor – this being linked to the sincerity[22] of "true repentance":

> Brother John: *A man that has all he needs in his home, does he still has the need to shout out to God, to pray to God to give him a decent life? He is living well and he doesn't feel the need for God. Meanwhile in Romania, I saw it with my own eyes, ten-year old children crying, lifting their arms to the sky and praying. There you find God, there you find true repentance.*

This excerpt is not a singular event but, on the contrary, the topic of the homeland as one of true repentance has appeared with a high frequency in the religious speeches. It was usually mentioned as a comparison with the 'low level of repentance' present in the *Fermontais* context. I have also encountered it in informal discussions like the one below:

> Brother Cătălin: *At home there is real repentance, my brother. People there are poor, God knows that. People, in their poverty, cry out to God with sincerity to give them a piece of bread. God will descend there because none of his children will be left starving. He will feed them. There you will find the true joy. You will never forget it.*

I feel the need to mention that I am not asserting that things are actually like that, but solely that this is the way that they are portrayed by the religious brothers I have entered in contact with. The homeland becomes the place of 'true repentance' and poverty, the same poverty that has been for many of my interlocutors' one of the reasons for migrating, is now seen as a source of this 'true repentance'. This type of discourse is often used by the preachers as a way to direct attention to the way the believers are conducting their lives abroad, and to give an example of how they should live their lives. This issue becomes clearer when we look at how one of my non-practicing interlocutors considers his place of origin:

21 Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (15 September 1486 – 18 February 1535) was a German magician, occult writer, theologian, astrologer, and alchemist;

22 I will further address the issue of sincerity in the following section.

Sam: *At home people are poor. I don't really know how they manage to survive with so little. Here is different. Here you will not starve – you will always find something to eat, something to work.*

Sam is a nineteen years old Roma, who has been living in Belgium for eleven years and who has received an education here – he has attended a professional school with a focus on administration. He has already worked for two years as an administrator for a warehouse but now he is, as he puts it, 'on a break', but he doesn't worry about finding a place to work. Also, when I asked him his opinion regarding the reduced number of young people that attend the religious services he replied:

Sam: *Young men come here to make a living, to earn money, because at home it's just too hard. But not all the things that they do are in God's liking. So how can I go to church on a Sunday if I know that the evening before I went to the disco? How can I go to church if during the week I have sinned, therefore I know I'm not clean?*

Sam's example is relevant for the tensions that arise in maintaining the religious practice in a migratory context. Other non-practitioner Roma people I have spoken with, especially young ones, had a similar discourse as to what concerned their place of origin. However, in this case, the poverty that acted as a source of 'true repentance' in Romania, is the one that, in their life abroad, limits their religious practice.

Returning to the religious connotations added to the places of origin, one of the brothers reinterpreted the two countries that are important for him – Romania and Belgium – in an unexpected manner. In talking to me about the 'true repentance' that he finds in the villages at home he comments:

Brother Cătălin: *We have a saying: Romania is Egypt and Belgium is Canaan.*

But to understand this statement we must return to the text that he refers to, notably, the Bible:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses in the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho, saying,
Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, when ye are passed over Jordan into the land of Canaan;
Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places:
And ye shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land, and dwell therein: for I have given you the land to possess it. (Num. 33:50-53)

Thus, in using this comparison, brother Cătălin links his migration with the exodus of the Israeli people from Egypt to the land promised by God, Canaan.

8. Being Born Again and the Difficulty on Repentance

Another issue I would like to discuss regarding the interplay between religious and ethnic frontiers is that of conversion seen as a new birth, as a re-birth:

> *Nicodemus said unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?*
> *Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*
> *That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*
> *Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.* (John 3:4-7)

The new birth signified for my interlocutors adopting a new identity, one that is linked with religious views about personhood, about how one should conduct his life. However, as I will show throughout this section, this change brings forth strong tensions between the old self and the new self, between what was once part of an ethnic identity and what is now the religious one.

An ethnographic example will help bring a clearer picture about how being born again unfolds in everyday life. One of the first Romanian Roma I've met in Fermont was Darius, also known as Pitbull. He is 24 years old, was born in Germany, while his parents originated from a small town in Arad County, Romania. He is playing at the gambling machines in Benny's[23] bar and, from time to time, he gets upset and vividly shakes the machine, while verbally expressing his discontent. He has a round face, covered with a carefully done shave with three stripes of small hairs across each cheek, and kind dark brown eyes. Being not of a tall stature but not short either, with a rather solid corporal constitution, the first appearance might be a little intimidating. However, after talking to him for a bit, he turns up to be a very pleasant company. With a thick voice and a small speech impediment he takes me into a brief chronological view of his life, from Germany to France, Holland and finally Belgium. He has settled in Fermont with his entire family for five years now and he has a legal status. I will try to briefly present the evolution and the changes in identity that I have noticed about Darius during my fieldwork because he is rather representative for the dialectic between the different frontiers like the religious and the ethnic ones that are used in social interaction. As you might notice I am writing about Darius using the present tense and his real name, but the sad truth is that shortly after finishing my fieldwork he passed away. Although I find it very difficult to narrate his story, this is a way to thank him for accepting and treating me as a friend, and to preserve a part of him.

The moment of visible change in Darius's behaviour is also an unfortunate and sad one – more precisely when he had his first attack that knocked him unconscious. He was then re-converted to 'repentance' on the hospital bed by the pastor. I say re-converted because he had previously told me that he was converted for the first time two years ago, along with other 40 young men, of whom no one still attended the church's services.

23 Benny is of Moroccan origin and has been living in Belgium for 20 years.

Darius: *Not to brag or anything, but before I settled down*[24] *I was the most restless*[25] *of the entire neighbourhood, the craziest Gypsy around. Everybody knew me.*
Me: *Then how come this settling down?*
Darius: *Well, I have repented again on the hospital bed. But repentance is hard, man.*
Me: *I have heard many times people saying that repentance is hard. I don't seem to get it. What does it mean?*
Darius: *It is hard because when you are young you want to do a lot of things but not all of them are in God's liking*[26]*. For example, you are not allowed to masturbate, to gamble*[27]*, or enter the bar. Nor can you do stuff that other Gypsies here do, like the second-hand car trade or scrap metal trade. You have to let everything behind and start a new life. And that's hard…*

Another encounter between Darius and Benny, the barkeeper, is also relevant here. It is a cold, dull mid-December Thursday and I am hanging out at the bar. I am soon joined by Darius and a friend of his. We talk a little and play a game of darts. This is happening after Darius's re-conversion. He challenges Benny at a match in which the barman loses. The latter react:

Benny: *You beat me again, Pitbull! It's your lucky day!*
Darius [with a very serious figure and tone of voice]: *My name is Darius! Please don't call me like that because I am not what I used to be.*

This notion of being born again is one that has intrigued me and I find the above-mentioned example relevant for the "overt signs" used in order to construct a frontier. It has been a recurrent topic in the religious discourses but also in the informal ones. For example, in one of his sermons, Brother John says:

Brother John: *Nicodim comes up to Jesus and tells him: "Teacher, we know that you come from God, we know that you are His son, but what do I have to do in order to be saved?" Jesus then replies: "Until you will be born from water and Holy Spirit, you will not be able to have me." You see, he is speaking about baptism in water. A man, once he has made a baptism in water - when he is mature, not a child - that means that he has changed into a new man, with a clean conscience. Once he has made the pledge to follow God's word he is a born man.*

Brigit Meyer (1998), in her work on Pentecostalism in Ghana, mentions that *born again* also means distancing oneself from the past. Kinship ties, the worship of ancestors, traditional medicine can all be discarded. This transforms social relations with the community from which one originates. Moreover, as Darius' story shows, the past is something to be left behind, and becomes a morally charged category. Very often, one of the explanations given for present misfortunes takes the form of 'the past catching up with you' (Jones: 2005). Thus, the notion of *born again* implies a very strict, radical identity change, with the rejection of past identities which also include

24 My rough translation from the Romanian expression "*m-am cumintit*"
25 My rough translation from the Romanian word "*zbuciumat*";
26 My translation from the Romanian expression "*pe placul Domnului*";
27 My translation from the Romanian expression: '*sa joci la aparate';*

ethnic traits. People theologically transcend their previous selves and the goal becomes the sanctification that is attained through specific worship activities. These are done within the Pentecostal congregation which "becomes the site for communicating with and manifesting the divine. This, helps produce a community in both a doctrinal and anthropological sense, as people use prayer, songs, and testimonies to articulate individual longing for redemption and union with God" (Brodwin: 2003, p. 93). Thus, the new self is welcomed into a new kinship, the members of the church becoming brothers and sisters who share the same beliefs and practices. Concerning the practices, although many scholars agree that the success of Christianity lies in its ability to provide services that people normally cannot get by themselves, Joel Robbins believes that the key to social productivity of charismatic and Pentecostal churches is that of defining ritual practices as a basis for social interaction (Robbins: 2009). Moreover, he argues that Pentecostalism gives "tools of association to everyone" and flourishes where there is an "institutional deficit" (Robbins: 2004). Thus, while ethnic identity is one of the roots for the "prejudice, intolerance, discrimination and social exclusion" (European Commission: 2012) that Roma face in their everyday life, the religious identity provides the symbolic resources for social mobility (Fosztó: 2009), and the stage on which one can assume roles otherwise refused[28].

Being born again gives the ethnic identity new value and the preachers used every occasion to underlie this matter. The visit of two Romanian converted priests is of relevance here. They are priests that have served in historical churches like the catholic and orthodox one and, for various reasons, have found God's truth in one of the neo-protestant religions, and have converted. However, I do not wish to signal their preaching here, namely the one that they gave at a Sunday morning service, but the afternoon sermon given by the pastor:

> Pastor Mani: *Take for example the converted priests that were here in the morning. They are men with three universities, former priests and orthodox deacons who come down with us, the Gypsies; who have returned to God. Even if before Romanians had no respect for us, Gypsies, they are here now with us. For we are born again. For God, it doesn't matter if you are white or black, Gypsy or Romanian, because God will come and we must all repent before him.*

The Pastor creates a filiation that links the Roma with the larger religious community, and this functions as a principle of internal and external social identification (Hervieu-Léger: 1999). Furthermore, the idea he and other brothers preached about constantly is that through the new religious identity, the ethnic one becomes more valuable, not only within the community, but also in reference to other groups.

However, as I have mentioned before, that expression *repentance is hard* turned very often throughout my fieldwork. After speaking with several older members about it, and hearing their stories about the multiple and often "*surrendering's*"[29] happening

28 One relevant example for this is Pastor Mani who is non-literate, but he is the most important person within the religious community. Thinking of J. Goody's (1986) ideas on the social implications of writing – more precisely – the establishment of a monopoly over the interpretation of the sacred writings by a category of literate priests - it would seem that 'repentance' surpasses such distinctions and abilities.

29 My translation from Romanian: "*predari*". This term designates the act of returning to God, of letting oneself go in face of God. Usually, those baptized in water, the converted, did not always respect the rules

there, I came to realize that this 'difficulty' came from the radical change of identity in this migratory context. "The Pentecostal code of morality forbids smoking, drinking, dancing, swearing, watching commercial films, wearing jewellery, perfume, or cologne, dressing provocatively and *having pre- or extramarital sex, masturbating*[30]. [...] In the Pentecostal hermeneutic of the gospel, Christians must re-enact in their own lives the biblical drama of humankind's creation, fall, and redemption" (Brodwin 2003, p. 88).

So let's see what this difficulty meant for another one of my interlocutors. It's a late Friday evening and I find myself again in Benny's bar enjoying the company of several Roma while assisting their game of rummy. The bar is quite animated by our presence there, in total we are 8 men. Benny has augmented the level of music and everybody is having a good time. This is when I encounter Michael whom I approach with a remark of appreciation to his perfect French pronunciation. He is a 23 year old man – and I say 'man' because he has three children – with a large smile, thin lips and an usual crew-cut hairstyle. He is in fact Darius's cousin. He talks with a strong accent from the Western region of Romania and he is telling me about one of the most spread occupation among the Roma here in Fermont – that of the car trade. When I asked him about the difficulty of repentance he answered:

> Michael: *I myself, I am de-repented*[31] *. When you get married and you are repented you have to be very loyal to your wife. But when you do it at a young age like I did, there comes a time when you get bored. Before I was straight, I followed all the rules, but I wanted to run away with another woman and I had to de-repent. Plus, you are here, abroad, and this makes it even more difficult.*

This type of discourse is often used by different members of the religious community, especially the young ones. It was, therefore, inevitable for it not to be approached during the sermons. However, here it gained a different note:

> Brother John: *Let me tell you the summary of God's word regarding this issue. Jesus himself said: Take the cross each day and follow me. But what is this cross? It is the place where Jesus died – thus, it means suffering, pain, difficulty. Repentance is not hard, it is easy when you open your heart to Jesus. It is the most wonderful thing when you do it with all your heart, when you truly repent.*

Thus, in the religious discourses, the notion of 'difficulty' is somewhat rejected, while an emphasis is put on the actual of practice of the religious precepts and on the sincerity of that practice.

We can see here another aspect of the interplay between different frontiers, more precisely, the morality and excellence standards through which performance is judged (Barth: 1967). These aspects are similar to other ethnographies of Roma conversions like the one described by Paloma Gay Blasco in her work on the Spanish Gypsies or Gitanos from Jarana. She mentions the "dominant Gitano discourses of prestige and authority, which focus on moral righteousness" (Gay y Blasco: 2002, p. 184), and that

imposed by the religion, and they "quit" for a while the religion. Thus, the act of surrendering meant a returning to repentance;

30 This is my add to the list after several discussions with different members;

31 My translation from the Romanian term: "*a se dezpocai*".

the Roma in Madrid maintain their identity by focusing on their personhood. More precisely, on a specific personality trait that is distinct from the *Payos* (non-Gitanos) that can be summed as "an awareness of each other as moral beings" (Gay y Blasco: 1999, p. 41). This is also the departure point of László Fosztó's work on the maintaining and the transforming of the moral ego in the context of the religious conversion within a group of Roma from Transylvania. He adds to his analysis the concept of *sincerity*, a non-vernacular concept borrowed from Keane (1997) that could be also useful in this particular discussion. The ideal of the converted personality, says Fosztó, involves honesty and complete transparency, words mirroring the interior state – sincerity thus becoming the unity between the self and the behaviour (Fosztó: 2009). However, as I have shown earlier, the maintaining of sincerity, of a constant moral conduct, is a delicate process, one with ups and downs, and with moments of de-repentance, and moments of surrendering or re-repentance.

9. Conclusion

> Brother John: *In my opinion eighty percent of all the Gypsies are religious; they have the belief in God. They are blessed by God so that they would want to live completely by the word of God. However, converted Roma, born again ones, are less.*

In a globalized world where the religious blaze takes new forms, ranging from the "*bricoleur pèlerin*" (Hervieu-Léger: 1999) characterized by a great mobility on the 'faith market', to the "*convertí*" seen as a deeper voluntary engagement that involves the adaptation of one's life to new norms, the proliferation of Pentecostalism to such different contexts is an astonishing phenomenon. One of the forms it has taken is found among the Roma which have converted in great numbers in the last fifty years. Although the available literature on the Pentecostal conversions of Roma throughout Europe is so far limited (Ries: 2014), it has provided us with important details about this process.

Scholars argue that Pentecostalism has brought forth a modern ethno-genesis (Delgado: 2014), creating new religious frontiers and reinforcing old ethnic ones between the Roma and the non-Roma (Gay y Blasco: 1999; Strand: 2014; Slavkova: 2014). Others, however, discuss how conversion allows for the transgression of all ethnic boundaries (Fosztó & Anastasoaie: 2001), or the appearance of trans-ethnic discourses (Ries: 2014).

In this context, this particular ethnography tries to bring a more nuanced picture of the experience of repentance by looking at the discourses used in sermons and informal encounters, and linking them with everyday practices. I have shown how ethnic frontiers like tradition and custom are being reinterpreted in a religious fashion in order to create a new filiation that makes members of the spiritual community similar to past, present and future ones. However, in this migratory context, repentance becomes more difficult. The homeland becomes the place of 'true repentance', while Belgium becomes the place of 'difficult repentance'. Their struggling for a better life abroad often brings tensions for their new religious identity. Thus, the process of conversion in this migratory context is not only a long one, but also a tensioned one.

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