

Cultural Trauma and Social Stigma among the Vlach-speaking Roma in Greece

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Abstract

In this paper I analyze the processes of ethnic identity formation among a group of Vlach-speaking Roma (Arom) in Greece. Originating from the community of Kalomira in the Pindus Mountains, this group has been settled in Athens for decades. Their ancestors, coming from other Vlach-speaking communities, settled in the village of Kalomira in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as blacksmiths and musicians. Historically, they were subjects of social exclusion from local means and power, based on their double perception as “ethnically others” and “foreigners” by the “autochthone” Vlach population. The heteronym “Gypsies” which their “other compatriots” use to name them, encapsulates precisely this double otherness. In this context emerges a stigmatized identity, or even a “collective alterity”, and an intergenerational cultural trauma. This fact is linked to the transformations of their collective identity in the urban context, through processes of cultural transformation, but also disguise. Specifically, in Athens, the Arom, by emphasizing the common Vlach/Aromanian language, which they themselves adopted through a process of acculturation, assume and project the identity of the Vlach/Aromanian. Although this identity is also devalued in the urban milieu, due to the hegemonic connection of the “Vlach” with pastoralism and the countryside, it nevertheless possesses greater symbolic capital than the historically demonized “Gypsy identity”. As a result, the Arom leave their “Gypsy past” in darkness and oblivion. It is, moreover, of particular significance that the younger generation is largely unaware of the “specificity” of the group, which represents a secret identity among the older generation.

Theodoros Spyros was born in 1971 in Peristeri, Athens. He studied Social Anthropology at Panteion University, Athens, Greece. He conducted postgraduate studies in History (University of Paris 1- Pantheon Sorbonne), Social Anthropology (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales-Paris), and Tourist Administration (Hellenic Open University). He received his PhD from the Department of Sociology of Panteion University. He has taught Social Anthropology and Sociology of Culture at the Department of Sociology of the University of Crete. Moreover, he taught as adjunct professor the courses “Public and Private Life in Greece II: the modern times” and “Sociology and Anthropology of Sports” at the Hellenic Open University. Currently, he is Assistant Professor in the field “State, Ethnic Groups and Locality” at the Department of Political Science of the University of Crete, and adjunct professor of Cultural Studies at the Hellenic Open University.