

RELIGIOSITY AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY. PROSPECTING THE LIFE - NARRATIVES OF TWO ROMANIAN ROMA FROM POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA*

Marian Zăloagă**

DOI: 10.2478/amsh-2023-0007

Abstract

Studies on the religion and the religiosity of Roma people represent a significant part of the Romani research published during the last decades. Unlike the interviews used by the non - Roma social scientists, the texts I am addressing in the present article are more elaborate ingroup voices of Roma elites. They are more sophisticated in tackling the religiosity matters and are, purposely or not, contributing to the transnational Roma literature. Their reading allows access to the voice of two Romanian Roma elites who approach the matter of fighting racism not only from their own lived religion experience but also from the perspective of the relatives and friends recollected in the pages of the autoethnographically writings.

Keywords: *Romanian Roma identity; autoethnography; religion, religiosity*

It has been reiterated that the knowledge production about the Gypsies/Roma people was for a long time a field regulated by the non-Roma. As a consequence, the discourses visited fluctuated between a variety of overtones and paradigms relevant for the cultural history of the majority groups. Many authors who approached the topic insisted on the controlling and/or repressive measures that had been enforced by different institutional actors. Biased leanings such as the criminalization or the infantilization of the Roma groups characterized numerous outgroup inquiries. It is true that there was a category of non-Roma authors who preferred to elaborate on the theme of an exotically romanticized otherness of the Gypsies/Roma who were represented in such a manner as to be contrasted with what the idea of modern European civilization was epitomized to be standing for. It has been recently emphasized that in fictional, scientific or hybrid productions, the Gypsies/Roma were turned into objects of the

* The research has received funding from the NO Grants 2014-2021, under Project contract UEFISCDI no. 38/2021.

** Scientific Researcher, Ph.D., "Gheorghe Șincai" Institute of Socio-Human Research of the Romanian Academy, marian.zaloaga@academia-cj.ro; zaloagam@yahoo.com

hegemonic and biased Western gaze.¹ Inevitably, such printings are more likely to mirror the political viewpoints corresponding to the ideological clashes within the non-Roma cultures. Admittedly, the discourses about the Gypsies/Roma in these texts display an obvious tendency of the non-Roma to objectify the members of the marginalized and heterogenous ethnic groups that are now gradually identifying as Roma. In my opinion, the examination of the representation of the Romanies is directly or indirectly suited to express the values, respectively, the shortcomings acknowledged at the level of the practices and policies of the Christian/European and non-Christian/-European normative cultures.

For a very long time, the bookish modes of knowing/representing otherness have been widely ignored by the Roma themselves. Only its everyday and usually discriminatory expression shared by the ordinary non-Roma could be acknowledged by the members of this ethnic group. Folkloric and popular culture productions articulating a prevalently deviant representation of the Roma, have been in the long run internalized both by non-Roma and the Roma communities. In the process it cannot be denied that, occasionally, some elements intrinsic to this othering rhetoric could be pragmatically exploited by both sides. However, the relation was constantly asymmetrical and one needs to recognize that these discourses contributed to the demeaning and to the self -/ stigmatization of the Roma.

The aforementioned ignorance with respect to the knowledge production occurring outside the Roma group has been recently replaced by a new stand. At the impulse of non-Roma elites, already two generations of Roma elites have found it imperative to try to emancipate the people they have been claiming to represent from the negative power of the outgroups' biased discourses. In order to change this state of affairs, Roma representatives understood it was prerequisite to actively engage in knowledge production. Presently, by means of writing back, Roma elites strive to proudly give voice to a marginalized and highly diverse ethnic group. The legitimate claim to turn the transnational Roma people into a subject with its distinct voice/(s), involved the critical examination of previous academic as

¹ The most encompassing post-colonial approaches to the topic are: David Mayall, *Gypsy Identities 1500-2000. From Egipcians and Moon-men to the Ethnic Romany*, London & New York, Routledge, 2003 and the recent synthesis of Klaus-Michael Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner: Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung*, Berlin, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011. Another useful reference bringing together voices from the Western and Eastern academia as well as some Romanian Roma representatives is the volume edited by Herbert Uerlings, Iulia-Karin Pătruț (eds.) *'Zigeuner' und Nation Repräsentation – Inklusion – Exklusion*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Verlag, 2008.

well as fictional or semi-fictional productions. In the footsteps of the non-Roma academics and public speakers, Roma activists have started to question hegemonic modes of knowledge production. In their affirmative action they focus on historical instances that have been until very recently ignored. More specifically, they develop not only a victimizing rhetoric but also encourage the Roma elites to manifest agency and even to embrace decolonizing versions of writing that would, eventually, contribute to the collective self – esteem and to the empowerment of the ethnic group.²

The in-group participation in the process of knowledge production is only few decades old. However, the investment of some Roma in their cultural capital has made them more acutely aware of the power of the words of the non-Roma. Exactly the later watchfulness stimulated some Roma educated elites to develop a sense of belonging to an unjustly disparaged group and to publicly contest the outgroups' biased discourses.

To all these internal accumulations one should highlight the importance of a transformation that has been going on within the normative cultures' academia. At this level, the post-modernist turn encouraged the exploration of the ways in which the engagement in the identity politics can impact on the knowledge production. It led to a divorce from the cold pretense of positivist objectivity and made it possible that the resources of the subjective narratives could be integrated as essential elements in the knowledge production of all sorts. Personal experiences (re-)/collected from various everyday contexts are now regarded to be relevant information that may enable a more refined understanding of sensitive social issues. Also, in case of my research interest, they are regarded as valuable items capable to highlight the challenges and the transformations of the Roma authors in their efforts to normalize or even banalize the Otherness allocated for centuries to their ethnic group.

Autoethnographic genre and the Roma voicing

Autoethnographic writing appears to be a stimulating tackling because it encourages the manifestation of the subjectivities of the represented subject. As a subgenre of life - writing, autoethnography represents a qualitative approach helpful not only to explore, but also

² A claim to a veritable participation with the final goal of decolonization and emancipation of the Roma transnational identity has been formulated by two Romanian Roma intellectuals. See: Iulius Rostas, *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*, Budapest & New York, Central European University Press, 2019, pp. 40-41, 165-166, 174-184; Vasile Ionescu, *Rromii – o istorie culturală. A doua abolire și imperatiul etic al recunoașterii*, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2022, pp. 80, 83, 90, 96-100.

to politically instrumentalize personal/auctorial subjectivity. As compared to other genres of life - writings such as the memoir or the journal, autoethnography accounts for the author's personal experience by considering his/her cultural background, or else said by highlighting the intricacy between the personal and the cultural in a narrative.³ Lately, this genre has achieved many followers from the field of the humanities and the social sciences and has been displaying many variations.

Indeed, autoethnography is particularly valued for featuring a high level of flexibility in modes of producing knowledge. Additionally, this sort of life - narrative is appreciated for raising critical questions with regard to positionality⁴ of those referred to in a textual - testimonial context. An autoethnographic production usually starts with the premise that "the lived experiences of emotional epiphanies" need to be observed and examined because "they influence our perceptions and interpretations of people's lives."⁵ Else said, autoethnography draws its particular profile from its pursuit to show "the relational entanglements that permeate how life is lived and told to others."⁶ Like no other life - writing genre, the autoethnography inspires the author to be self - reflexive while displaying his/her personal vulnerable position, in the same time, inviting the readers to viscerally identify with the feelings evoked in the text.⁷ Essentially, the evocative autoethnography texts often engage with the topic of vulnerability. Its explorations would eventually prompt to the co-participation of both writer and readers to produce meaning by addressing a human life in both its emotional and analytical parameters.⁸ Exactly, the very personalized engagement that characterizes this approach enables both sides to address sensitive matters such as cultural prejudices, stereotypes and social injustices. The appeal to the personal affects, narrated in the first person, may turn the text into a more effective tool that is adequate to critically address power differentials between groups. Hence, by co-participating the readers this approach may gain a more embodied comprehension about the power of prejudices and the experience of

³ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, „Introduction. Making Sense and Taking Action: Creating A Caring Community of Autoethnographers”, in Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis (eds.), *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Second Edition, London & New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 1-3.

⁴ Yassir Morsi, "Using 'Auto-Ethnography' to Write about Racism", in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 509.

⁵ Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography Writing Lives and Telling Stories*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 50.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 54-55, 60, 79.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 59-60, 87, 91; Jillian A. Tullis, "Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research", in *Handbook of Autoethnography ...*, p. 106.

stigmatization. The immediate consequence would be an acute awareness about their reiteration and/or, eventually, such readings may even stimulate the reader to get actively and politically engaged, to take the side of the stigmatized.⁹ In other words, by telling stories that express feelings of anger and unveil attitudes of resistance to the negatively stereotypic cultural discourses, the autoethnographic narrative has the potential to turn passive reproducers of normative and institutionalized “insidious ideas and practices”¹⁰ into active opponents or public fighters against them.

It has been recognized that by means of telling stories power dynamics may be challenged and the multiplication of the voices and of the perspectives available can significantly help in this respect. Moreover, the myriad of voices made audible by means of the autoethnographic texts can reveal the instrumental and intersectional features manifesting particularly when layers of identity are engendered.¹¹ This entanglement explains why the autoethnography is intrinsically linked to the emancipative writings of the members of the marginalized groups confronting all sort of historical oppressions. Obviously, these narratives are uttered by those members aware of their privileged condition but who, from a point on in their life, may find it morally important to (re-)/identify with the disempowered/unheard groups.¹² In order to achieve an immediate effect, the autoethnographic texts articulate a narrative which builds around the emotivity of the story teller. Concomitantly,

⁹ Susanna Maria O’Neil, “On becoming a better supervisor. A Deconstruction of Autoethnography as Method for Professional Development”, in *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 32, Number 6, 2018, p. 488; <http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2970>; Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, “Introduction. Making Sense and Taking Action: Creating A Caring Community of Autoethnographers”, p. 5; Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography...*, p. 52; Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, in Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, (eds.), *Critical Autoethnography. Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, Walnut Creek, Ca, Left Coast Press, Inc., 2014, pp. 17, 20; Robin M. Boylorn, “A Story & A Stereotype. An Angry and Strong Auto/Ethnography of Race, Class, and Gender”, in *Critical Autoethnography. Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*, p. 132; Jillian A. Tullis, “Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research”, in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 106.

¹⁰ Robin M. Boylorn, “A Story & A Stereotype...”, p. 133; Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, p. 3; Gresilda A. Tilley-Lubbs, “Autoethnography Crosses Cultural Borders”, in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 312.

¹¹ Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, pp. 11, 22.

¹² Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography ...*, p. 239; Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, p. 22; Robin M. Boylorn, “A Story and A Stereotype...”, p. 131; Yassir Morsi, “Using “Auto-Ethnography” to Write about Racism”, p. 509.

such writings become an invitation made to the readers to sensorially/bodily and affectively identify with the life experiences of the author and of the groups he has chosen to give voice to.¹³ Consequently, an essential peculiarity of this subgenre of life - writing is to tell the story of those who choose to self-anchor within specific cultures.

In achieving its societal goal, it strongly relies on the use of narrator's "personal experiences to [underline] the entanglement of the personal and the social."¹⁴ However, it would be a mistake to believe that such texts written by representatives of discriminated minorities are simply indulging with the topic of sufferance. Their purpose goes beyond simple victimization. Rather, such writings should be understood as societal calls made by the authors - who address both the in-group and the out-group - to publicly denounce the potential perpetrators of the social injustices.¹⁵

Similar to any biographical narrative, the autoethnographic writing resides on memory and inevitably on its shortcomings. Memory is intrinsic to any self - narrative and admittedly it is a partial, situated and an active process of working through the relevant information from the past. The past events are inescapably transformed to carry "personal, political, emotional and relational" significance for the present.¹⁶ The autoethnographic texts can make use of a variety of sources such as journals, e-mails, blogs, memos, sketches, field notes, personal documents, interviews, memorabilia, photos, multimedia materials, official records or personal journals, and newspaper articles.¹⁷ Frequently, autoethnographic productions plainly assume the flaws in the terms of the accuracy of recording the past. Nevertheless, they hope to compensate with the reframing of the events/experiences and with their emphasizing the relational value of reshaping/rearranging of the facts recollected from the past. Consequently, through the writing process these recollections may also be given a completely new meaning. Else said, by the appeal to the past events, recognisably fragmentary by its nature, one may concoct a text which relinquishes factual objectivity. Nonetheless,

¹³ Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography...*, pp. 63, 213; Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, "Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice", pp. 5, 15.

¹⁴ Heewon Chang, "Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography for Social Science Research", in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 53.

¹⁵ Tami Spry, "The Matter of Performative Autoethnography", in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 70; Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography ...*, pp. 70, 173.

¹⁶ Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography ...*, pp. 239-240, 252.

¹⁷ S.M. O'Neil, "On becoming a better supervisor. A Deconstruction of Autoethnography...", p. 490; Heewon Chang, "Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography for Social Science Research", p. 58.

through the effect of verisimilitude it may transform the elaboration and also the reading of the life - narrative into a transformative experience.¹⁸ More than a detached academic research on topics such as discrimination and/or racism, story – telling in which the mundane data from the personal past are interpolated appear to be more persuasive when one talks about the collective generational trauma because the personal details can sensorially enrich the consistence of the testimonies delivered by the disempowered.¹⁹

Depending on the styles adopted by each author, autoethnographic productions promise to “provide a more engaged, embodied, and ethically accountable analysis because they [advocate] a relational reading.”²⁰ Yet, regardless of the style, the accountment for the positionality in terms of age, race, gender, social status, religion, etc., represent key references in the autoethnographic publications. Such elements featuring the peculiarity of these texts must be seriously considered not only for their performative, embodied, politically empowering characteristics, but also for their envisioned therapeutic effect.²¹

More than other life – narratives genres, autoethnography can be regarded as an auctorial performative act and in the same time a call to defiance of the modes of knowledge production as conventionally pursued in the hegemonic Western academia.²² Nonetheless, despite of the emphasis on the subjective modes of knowing, one should not be tempted to consider evocative approaches from autoethnographic writings as opposed to the analytical inquiries. Depending on the author there is always a fine balance between these two aspects. Indeed, the hybridity of the autoethnographic text may apparently blur the lines between the two registers because, in fact, these writings’ purpose is to complement the scientific methodologies with the power of the evocative and creative modes of telling a story. By seeking to find a balance between facts and reiterated human values and feelings, an autoethnographic approach can also build bridges between the social sciences and the humanities.²³ What

¹⁸ Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography ...*, pp. 243, 255; Yassir Morsi, “Using ‘Auto-Ethnography’ to Write about Racism...”, p. 510.

¹⁹ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, “Introduction. Making Sense and Taking Action...”, p. 4; Yassir Morsi, “Using ‘Auto-Ethnography’ to Write about Racism...”, p. 507; Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography ...*, p. 249.

²⁰ Aisha Durham, “Textual Experience. A Relational Reading of Culture”, in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, p. 322.

²¹ Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, p. 17; Yassir Morsi, “Using ‘Auto-Ethnography’ to Write about Racism...”, p. 511.

²² Yassir Morsi, “Using ‘Auto-Ethnography’ to Write about Racism...”, p. 511.

²³ Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography...*, pp. 65, 66, 218, 231.

seems to be crucial to the overall discussion about this biographical subgenre is in what way the reincorporation of the feelings in the modes of knowledge production may conduct to a new textual outcome capable to “to resist mythical normative perspectives” and ultimately to “challenge hegemonic presumptions about difference.”²⁴

Fictional, semi-fictional and even academic productions which have been published recently in the field of Romani studies display features characteristic to the autoethnographical writings. Recent conference presentations or publications show an increased interest in exploiting the resourcefulness of autoethnographic narrative. Roma and non-Roma authors seem attracted by this approach which invites both the authors and the readers to reflect on the personal participative involvement in the artistic and in the knowledge productions referring to topics such as the development of intellectualism, the trans-national Roma literature and linguistics, the legacy of the injustices deriving from confronting the supremacy of the white, etc.²⁵ In her valuable research, Paola Toninato rightly pointed that influenced by the post-colonial theories, Romani authors who have engaged in the process of renegotiating and redrawing the group’s image, have increasingly begun “to challenge hegemonic representation of the fictional «Gypsies» in particular through autoethnographic writings.”²⁶ Therefore, they adopted a “constructive confrontation”²⁷, critically looking at the process of self - representation identified in different productions such as the “autobiographic texts, short stories, diaries, poetry, fiction, handbooks.”²⁸ It has been observed that in their explorations Roma

²⁴ Robin M. Boylorn, Mark P. Orbe, “Introduction. Critical Autoethnography as Method of Choice”, pp. 17, 22.

²⁵ Stefania Cotei, “Discovering Whiteness: A Critical Autoethnography of How Mindfulness can Help us Move beyond the Victim Perpetrator Paradigm”, in *Critical Approaches to Romani Studies*, May 18 – May 20, 2022, Hybrid conference at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Abstracts, <https://www.sh.se/download/18.5e5550aa18002b8586b918f9/1651656687597/Abstracts%202022.pdf> [last accessed 06.04.2023], p. 11; Russel Patrick Brown, “Towards Romani Intellectualism: Autoethnography as Method of Activism”, in *Critical Approaches to Romani Studies*, May 18 – May 20, 2022 Hybrid conference at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Abstracts, <https://www.sh.se/download/18.5e5550aa18002b8586b918f9/1651656687597/Abstracts%202022.pdf> [last accessed 06.04.2023], p. 8; Jelena Filipović, “Transdisciplinary qualitative paradigm in applied linguistics: autoethnography, participatory action research and minority language teaching and learning”, in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Volume 32, Issue 5, 2019, pp. 493-509.

²⁶ Paola Toninato, “Translating Gypsies. Nomadic Writing and the Negotiation of Romani Identity”, in *The Translator*, Volume 12, No. 2, 2006, p. 240.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 241.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

authors purposely position themselves as “cultural mediators between Roma and the Gadz e cultures.”²⁹ It is true that most of the studies already published focus on the literature produced by Roma authors from the Western European milieu, some sonorous names already becoming emblematic/canonical in voicing the Roma people.³⁰ In preparation of the terrain for future autoethnographic surveys relevant for the Eastern European and specifically for Romanian Roma, a series of publications have been recently edited. Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov coordinated a series of volumes that are portraying the main Roma representatives who through their activism struggled to give voice to the ethnic group they claimed to represent.³¹ Petre Matei also published a significant volume in which he covers the articulation of Romanian Roma identity in the interwar printed press.³² However, the afore mentioned projects only covered the first half of the 20th century and only a restricted number of texts may be reckoned as autoethnographic productions. An exception is the tackling of the matter of Roma publications in the interwar Romania by Raluca Bianca Roman. She highlighted the political emancipative purposes of the literary texts (e.g. letters, reviews, poems, songs etc.) published in the Roma press and in the non - Roma daily and cultural journals³³. Even though presently one can record an affluence of printings giving voice to the representatives of the ethnic group, the publications authored by Romanian Roma from the post-communist period, continue to remain almost entirely unexamined.³⁴

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 240.

³⁰ Thomas Acton, “Foreword”, in Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome. An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, Ann Arbor, Karoma Publishers, Inc., 1987, p. XII.

³¹ Elena Marushiakova, Vesselin Popov (eds.), *Roma Voices in History. A Sourcebook. Roma Civic Emancipation in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, Paderborn, Brill-Sch ning, 2021; Elena Marushiakova, Vesselin Popov (eds.) *Roma Portraits in History Roma Civic Emancipation Elite in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, Paderborn, Brill-Sch ning, 2022.

³² Petre Matei (ed.), *Mișcarea romă din România în presa interbelică: 1933-1941*, Cluj-Napoca/București, Editura Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale/Editura Institutului pentru Studierea Holocaustului din România “Elie Wiesel”, 2022.

³³ Raluca Bianca Roman, Sofiya Zahova, Aleksandar G. Marinov (eds.), “Romania” in *Roma Writings. Romani Literature and Press in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, Paderborn, Brill/Ferdinand Sch ningh, 2021, pp. 93-128.

³⁴ An exception is represented by previous research I undertook years ago. See: Marian Zăloagă, “Semantica rasei - De la clasificări tradiționale ale „țiganului” la discursul elitei rome din România contemporană”, in *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane „Gheorghe Șincai”*, XI, 2008, pp. 157-188.

Religion and religiosity and their significance in the Romanian Roma autoethnographic productions

In the present paper I chose to focus on the relevance of religiosity and religion in the life - narrative volumes published by two ethnic Roma activists from post-communist Romania. Rudolf Moca's "O picătură de viață" (2007)³⁵ and Valeriu Nicolae's "Țigan. Țândări!" (2022)³⁶ are rare but extremely valuable exercises of autoethnographic writing authored by Roma elites from Romania. What the two Roma representatives have in common is their engagement with the political representation of the ethnic group at different levels, regional respectively national and transnational. Both authors have a considerable degree of familiarity with journalistic activity. Having already been public spokesmen encouraged them to get engaged in a process of textual performativity of the selves³⁷ deemed to reveal certain peculiarities of the ethnic group they had chosen to give voice to.

The styles adopted by each author in telling their life - stories differs. It ranges from the implied religious emotiveness to a critical provocative stance. Despite the difference in the style and overtone, these texts are an intentional exhibition and exploration of the personal experiences, implicitly aiming to provoke emotional reactions, respectively, to trigger a response of the Roma or of the non - Roma readership to the social injustices.³⁸ In their writings, both authors confront the widely shared prejudiced discourses which also affects the understanding of the Roma people's spiritual and religious life. To a certain degree, the examination of these two life narratives under this specific aspect, is relevant because they may complement the cultural ethnographical, sociological and historical studies dedicated to the religious affiliation or to the forms of religiosity of the Romanian Roma people, authored by in-group intellectuals during the post - communist period.³⁹

³⁵ Rudolf Moca, *O picătură de viață*, Cluj-Napoca, AMM, 2007.

³⁶ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, București, Editura Asociația Casa Bună, 2022.

³⁷ See also: Aisha Durham, "Textual Experience a Relational Reading of Culture", in *Handbook of Autoethnography...*, pp. 322-323.

³⁸ Heewon Chang, "Individual and Collaborative Autoethnography...", p. 60.

³⁹ See: Delia Grigore, *Curs de antropologie și folclor rrom: Introducere în studiul elementelor de cultură tradițională ale identității contemporane*, București, Editura Credis, 2001; Vasile Burtea, *Rromii în sincronia și diacronia populațiilor de contact*, București, Lumina Lex, 2002; V. Burtea, "Religiozitatea rromilor din România și raporturile acestora cu bisericile", in Dieter Brandes & Olga Lukacs (eds.), *Un proiect de reîmpăcare a bisericilor – Punte între biserici, culturi și religii*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Accent, 2007, pp. 241-245; Vasile Ionescu, *Rromii – o istorie culturală. A doua abolire și imperativul etic al recunoașterii*, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2022; Petre Petcuț, *Rromii. Sclavie și libertate. Constituirea și emanciparea*

Autoethnographic works like those I am considering in the present paper are also relevant for the research in the field of lived religion. In fact, autoethnographic productions and the studies focusing on lived religion share a common trait that is their hybrid character. They are located at the intersection of the social sciences and the humanities, and both are informative about the everyday, bodily sensorial and emotional experience of the ordinary and/or marginalized people.⁴⁰

There are several factors that persuaded me to inspect the significance of the religious/-ity in the emerging Romanian Roma literature. For a very long period, religious references have been markers that contributed to an overstated otherness of the Romanies. Attributed infamous religious behaviour or even sheer irreligiosity has been discursively rehearsed to justify the long lasting rejective practices towards the Roma ethnics. Even nowadays, in an apparently secularized context, derogative labelling, hate and racist discourses, which has lately become to be coined as manifestation of antigypsyism,⁴¹ may infer religious references that can legitimize the social exclusion of the Romanies. In spite of significant transformations occurring in post-communist Romania with respect to the manifestation of religiosity among non-Roma and Roma ethnics, segregating practices continue to be a reality. They can be immediately relevant and manifest through the exclusion of the ethnic Roma from sharing the same burial sites with the non - Roma communities affiliated to traditional churches.⁴²

unei noi categorii etnice și sociale la nord de Dunăre 1370-1914, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2015; Marius Căldăraru, *Particularitățile misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în comunitățile romilor căldărari*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2022.

⁴⁰ Nancy T. Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers", in *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, Volume 29, No. 2, 2016, pp. 84, 90; Meredith B McGuire, "Individual Sensory Experiences, Socialized Senses, and Everyday Lived Religion in Practice", in *Social Compass* Vol. 63(2), 2016, pp. 152–162.

⁴¹ Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome...*, passim; Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy. Selected Essays*, (ed.) Dileep Karanth, (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), pp. 42-46, 107-114, 277-278; Wolfgang Wippermann, *Wie die Zigeuner. Antisemitismus und Antiziganismus im Vergleich*, Berlin, Elefant - Press - Verlag, 1997; Wolfgang Benz, *Sinti und Roma: Die unerwünschte Minderheit – Über das Vorurteil Antiziganismus*, Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 2014; Jan Selling, Markus End, Hristo Kyuchukov, Pia Laskar (eds.), *Antiziganism: What's in a Word? Proceedings from the Uppsala International Conference on the Discrimination, Marginalization and Persecution of Roma, 23-25 October 2013*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015; Iulius Rostas, *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe's Roma Policies Fail*, Budapest & New York, Central European University Press, 2019, pp. 10-20.

⁴² The phenomenon is encountered in the parish graveyards from the rural milieu. See: Sorin Gog and Maria Roth, "The Roma People of Romania", in Michael D. Palmer

Such bitter occurrences have been documented by academic studies and NGO's reports elaborated by social and cultural scientists. I find it stimulating to look at the rare life - narratives of the Romanian Roma elites and to discern whether by means of religious references and/or practices authors might have sought for and/or succeeded to establish fraternal relations with the majorities or, on the contrary, such references only infer frustration or revolt against a prolonged unfair treatment from the side of the members of the traditional churches.⁴³ The religious references at the level of these autoethnographic texts may also be correlated with the research undertaken by cultural anthropologists which have delivered rich evidence with regard to the religious ardor manifesting among the Roma which eagerly went into the direction of religious conversion. It has been asserted that the phenomenon of religious conversion led to the abandonment of traditional beliefs and also of the forms of semi-/religious practices associated with the exoticized Roma culture. Admittedly, this phenomenon implied the disaffiliation from the regionally hegemonic confessions which had social consequences. It has contributed to a renewed process of othering of the Roma converts in relation to both the out-group and the in-group members. Indeed, cultural anthropologist and sociologists of religion have identified the emergence of more or less elaborated personal narratives of religious rebirth shared by converted Roma people, which, in my opinion, can be regarded as proto-auto-ethnographical exercises. Their examination has highlighted that by means of religious re-affiliation, Roma ethnics might seek to escape social marginalization. Beyond intentions, the process had various consequences. It stimulated tendencies of auto-assimilation or it was able to create a moralistically purged new ethnic imaginary conducting to the auto-segregation of certain communities of converted Roma.⁴⁴

Having in mind the personal testimonies recorded and examined in the afore mentioned studies, in the present paper I am interested to understand whether this mass of academic literature - which hinted that the religious re-affiliation may be understood as a move instrumental in obtaining social deliverance and/or justice -

& Stanley M. Burgess (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2012, pp. 389, 391; Vasile Ionescu, *Rromii – o istorie culturală...*, p. 61; Vasile Ionescu, "Legislația și instituția sclaviei rromilor în Țările Române. O contribuție antropologică", in Adrian-Nicolae Furtună (ed.), *Culegere de Studii Rome*, București, Editura Centrului Național de Cultură a Romilor, 2022, p. 35.

⁴³ Sorin Căce, Cristina Tomescu, Daniela Cojocaru, "The Role of Religion in Several Roma Communities", in *Revista de Cercetare și Interventie Socială*, 36, 2012, pp. 162-177; V. Ionescu, *Rromii – o istorie culturală...*, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Sorin Gog and Maria Roth, "The Roma People of Romania", pp. 394, 398.

has any correlative in the texts of the two Romanian Roma authors. Unlike the interviews employed by the social scientists, the texts I am addressing in my study are more sophisticated in the ways they tackle the religious matters. Purposely or not, they also contribute to the transnational and cross-border Roma literature.⁴⁵ More than the academic productions which has fewer potential readers, semi-literary Roma authored texts may be regarded as veritable attempts to “re-claim Romani-ness” by means of overt expression of “a new Romani subjectivity – a subjectivity that is firmly rooted in counter-histories of Roma.”⁴⁶ The resulting counter-narratives are veritable samples of writing - back which, broadly speaking, can be regarded as post - positivist challenges to the knowledge production dedicated to the Roma people. The autoethnographic productions I am referring in this paper elaborate around facets of the Romanian Roma identities, and utterly represent undertakings with strong social and political implications. Having higher chances to be read outside the academia, these Romanian Roma life-narratives are undeniably thought to reply and to dismantle the hegemonic modes of imagining the Gypsies.⁴⁷

Despite its heterogeneity, the enriching body of Roma literature seeks to take control, by means of different narrating strategies, over the self - representation of the heterogenous groups confronting with a “traumatic collective experience.”⁴⁸ A perceptible denouncing tone can be traced in both texts I am focusing on which underscores the political significance of these writings. It has been generally acknowledged that many of the Roma literary productions have an “(auto-)biographical or docufictional character”⁴⁹ and that quite often the auctorial “self-representation might [...] fulfill some of the general expectations of what Roma are supposed to be and do”⁵⁰. From a positivist perspective, this would automatically be regarded as a specious approach. However, due to the power of its subjectivity, the Roma literature needs to be regarded as an assumed political exercise aiming the cultural decolonization and the emancipation of the Roma people. Authors hope to achieve this goal by voluntarily turning themselves into public voices. By narrating their lives, they attempt

⁴⁵ Marina Ortrud M. Hertrampf, “Romani Literature(s) as Minor Literature(s) in the Context of World Literature: A Survey of Romani Literatures in French and Spanish”, in *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, pp. 42-57.

⁴⁶ Ioanida Costache, “Reclaiming Romani-ness: Identity Politics, Universality and Otherness or, Towards a (New) Romani Subjectivity”, in *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2018, pp. 30–43.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 39, 42.

⁴⁸ Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, “The Romani Ethos: A Transnational Approach to Romani Literature” in *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, pp. 24-40.

⁴⁹ M. O. M. Hertrampf, “Romani Literature(s)...”, p. 50.

⁵⁰ A. B. M. Sevillano, “The Romani Ethos...”, p. 34.

to normalize or banalize the Roma, hence, undermining the influence of the bohemian, the mystical, the unordinary and the non-conformist Gypsy as it has been imagined in the non – Roma literature.⁵¹

Such texts can be regarded as typical examples of “*para-literature*”⁵² which are addressing both non - Roma and the young generation of Roma readership who uncritically absorbed elements of the identity prescribed to the “Gypsy Other.”⁵³ In the struggle for recognition and emancipation from the normative pan-Christian prejudiced discourses, each Roma author has the potential to turn into a prophet for the minority. Some may be aware and accept this mission while others may not.

In my opinion, Romanian Roma authors engaged with autoethnographic writing have the standing to illustrate the past and/or the contemporary everyday biases Roma people have been confronting with. Their texts shall not to be regarded as unserious and easy productions or as eventual appendixes to the social research that has been already carried by Roma and non-Roma academics. Since they draw on the manifestations of lived religion recollected through various episodes from the authors’ life, they need to be earnestly considered and be regarded as complementary testimonies about the religiousness manifesting within the Roma culture.

Two Romanian Roma authors’ profile and the prospective reception of their writings

The authors of the texts I am scrutinizing are two Romanian Roma males which chose to voice the Romanian Roma by taking advantage of their higher education. Indeed, this cultural capital makes them peculiar in the mass of Roma population who have generally been struggling to graduate both in communist and post-communist times. However, in spite of their higher education it does not mean that their life - path was free of material hardships that is recognized to be transgenerational and frequently associated with the Roma communities. Although they belong to different generational cohorts, their life - narratives show the recurrence of these patterns of acute material insecurity. Despite the divergence in the age category, their autoethnographic texts were published nearly to a similar stage in life. Considering the cumulative life experiences as matured men and their education, they both found it relevant to

⁵¹ Oksana Marafioti, “Romani Identity in Literary Practices”, in *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, pp.116-121; A. B. M. Sevillano, “The Romani Ethos...”, p. 33.

⁵² Ileana D. Chirilă, “Unity or Contiguity: Expanding the Field of Romani Literature”, in *Critical Romani Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2020, p. 20.

⁵³ O. Marafioti, “Romani Identity in Literary Practices”, p. 117.

reflect to their Roma identity from the position of agents involved in the voicing of the ethnic group in the post-communist Romania. It is essential to point that their narratives and specifically the religious references in these texts occur in a pluri-confessional landscape when the options for the manifestation of lived religiosity are unhampered by repressive state policies. However, both recover in their texts episodes from the Communist times, when the ethnic group was not officially recognized as a minority and when the religious affiliation of the Roma aspiring elites was monitored by secret police (Securitate).⁵⁴

One of the notable differences between the life-paths and implicitly the content of the life - narratives of the two Romanian Roma authors can be identified to the level they had reached in the process of representing the marginalized ethnic group. Hence, Rudolf Moca belongs to the first generation of post-communist Romanian Roma who after the regime change joined the group of public voices speaking on behalf of the vulnerable group.⁵⁵ His area of representativity can be located at regional level. Moca's public engagement in service of the Roma cause illustrates that the political representation of the Romanian Roma was from the very start influenced by factionalism deriving from regional cultural and historical conditions. On the other side, Valeriu Nicolae, has been coming of age exactly in the post - communist years when the social precarities and life choices brought him not only to different countries and continents, but also gave him the chance to play a part in the representation of the ethnic groups at a national and international stage.

Inevitably, their becoming as ordinary Romanian citizens, was influenced to some extent by the communist state atheistic view of the world. As a consequence, their life - narratives can be contrasted with the texts authored by non-Roma who insisted on the significance of the self - entitled King Cioabă, a Romanian Roma traditional leader from Sibiu, who claimed to be a central political representative of the ethnic group and, also, performed as neo-protestant pastors.⁵⁶

In contrast to the life of the hyper-mediatised Romanian Roma king, Valeriu Nicolae's and Rudolf Moca's communist education and their post-communist life trajectories impacted on the way they

⁵⁴ Manuela Marin, "Romii și regimul comunist din România", in Liliana Corobca (ed.), *Panorama comunismului în România*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2020, pp. 465-477; Manuela Marin, "Studiu introductiv," in Manuela Marin (ed.) *Romii și regimul comunist: marginalizare, integrare și opoziție*, Vol. 1, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Mega, 2017, pp. 57-63.

⁵⁵ Franz Remmel, *Die Roma Rumäniens – Volk ohne Hinterland*, Wien, Picus Verlag, 1993; Franz Remmel, *Alle Wunder dauern drei Tage. Vom Bulibascha der Zigeuner zum Kaiser der Roma*, Reșița, Editura InterGraf, 2005.

⁵⁶ F. Remmel, *Die Roma Rumäniens...*, pp. 89, 93, 94, 95.

accounted for their individual and collective identity as Romanian Roma. In both cases, the voicing of their *Romani-ness* has been, at first, made public in the mass media. R. Moca hosted a series of broadcastings dedicated to the Roma people at the local television and radio stations from Târgu – Mureș. He also produced an amateurish movie with anthropological claims, accompanied by a book published at a small local publishing house.⁵⁷ For his part, Valeriu Nicolae got involved in journalist activities, and collaborated with national newspapers. Due to his power of argument and to international expertise to the Council of Europe he became a representative of the Roma in a technocrat government. Much of his professional expertise and public engagement, which has always had a social and charitable feature transgressing rigid ethnic boundaries, brought him a wider public acknowledgement and audience. The respected French – German ARTE TV - channel highlighted his activity in addressing social inequalities in one of the worst famed slums in Bucharest.⁵⁸

The texts I am focusing on in this study bear an undeniable personal character and show the intricacy between analytical and evocative styles. In order to have a wide-ranging picture on how religious reference is or is not found relevant in self - narratives of the two Romanian Roma authors, I have chosen to refer only to those fragments that explicitly or implicitly hint to the religious life and to the experiences which are formulated quite often only by a vague reference to a religious institution and/or to a set of dogmas. Inevitably, conditioned by the content of the two autoethnographic volumes and influenced by the approaches adopted in the studies of lived religions, I chose to explore the ongoing process of personal encountering with the religiosity as it has been manifesting in parallel to the churchly routine and its ritual and practices. Thus, I am considering all sorts of religious and spiritual reference that are often unspecific from the perspective of the adherence to a denomination.⁵⁹ My analysis also acknowledges the effect of the popular religiosity in developing and maintaining a specific attitude toward a marginal/(-ized) group and subsequently highlights how the resulting outcome

⁵⁷ Rudolf Moca, *Rromii, Oamenii Focului. Tradiții, Obiceiuri, Legende, Basme, Mituri și Descântece din Folclorul Oral*, Târgu Mureș, Editura Nico, 2011. In this volume Moca collected various customs from rural milieu of Mureș County documenting the participation of ethnic Roma in carols singing (pp. 60-61) and the practice of fasting for the pascal celebration, their participation to the Mass celebrating Christ resurrection held in protestant or neo-protestant churches where the Roma believers have been registered (p. 62). In the previous pages he emphasized the very particular feature of Roma religiosity understood as a bricolage of non-Christian mythologies and a reinterpretation of Christian beliefs.

⁵⁸See: <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/104796-003-A/re-bucharest-s-lost-children/> [Last accessed 05.04.2023].

⁵⁹ N. T. Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field...", p. 87.

was experienced and expressed in the textual life - narrative articulated by the in-group voices. Intentionally or not, episodes from these autoethnographic productions are able to reveal levels of internalization, accommodations to and even response strategies developed by ordinary Romanian Roma individuals to prejudiced discourses and to social practices which determined the authors and/or other discriminated co-ethnics to navigate between multiple or go beyond any religious affiliation.⁶⁰

Despite obvious unevenness noticeable at the level of authorial style, unilateral or plural cultural referentiality and to the extent of reception,⁶¹ I consider the two samples of Romanian Roma autoethnographic productions as illustrative for the way in which present day Romanian Roma voices chose to argue on how religious references have been staying behind the cultural stigmatization of the Roma. In the same time, these writings can be illustrative for the way in which certain Roma individuals – i.e., family members or acquaintances – were able to formulate responses to the societal antigypsyism manifesting, in an inconspicuous or in an obvious manner, in the communist and post-communist Romanian society.

Although a parallel examination would seem more scholarly appropriate, I prefer to examine the productions in a sequence. The motivation behind this approach on the matters is determined by the acknowledgment that their personal testimonies are unique and highly situational. Therefore, a symmetrical comparative approach would be more likely to impoverish the semantical value of the qualitative references to religion each author decided to recollect and draw on in the published life - narrative. Inevitably, in the conclusion I will reflect upon the commonalities and the particularities of each voice as they are relevant for the authors' situatedness.

Rudolf Moca's "drop of life". From the temptation of orientalism to the mundane practice of religious acculturation

Born, raised and professionally active in a multi-cultural and pluri-confessional Transylvanian County of Romania constantly scoring high in the national censuses with respect to the ethnic

⁶⁰ Marian Zăloagă, "The Religious Affiliations of the Romanies from Post-Socialist Romania. Considerations Concerning the In-Group Academic Productions", in *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 431-460; Marian Zăloagă, "Religious Affiliation as a Political Site of Contestation? Polemical Voices of a New Generation of Romanian Romani Authors", in *Acta Marisiensis. Seria Historia*, Vol. 4, 2022, pp. 129-162.

⁶¹ See: Mărișescu Deian-Nicolae review to Valeriu Nicolae, "Țigan Țândări", Casa Buna Association, Bucharest 2022, ISBN: 978-973-0-36105-6, in *Review of Ecumenical Studies*, Volume 14, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 558-560.

declaration of the Roma identity, in the last decades Rudolf Moca has been a very active public figure. As already pointed, he has been a TV and radio producer, having developed a long career as a puppeteer at the Târgu - Mureş theatre for children. Already in the first pages of his autoethnographic book, he underscores that from the very beginning of his existence he had to face the effects of racial discrimination. Unexpectedly, firstly it manifested in-group, more specifically in his family. He shows how the grandmother, from his father's side, went stigmatizing and bullying him due to his blackness. The words she used had been harsh and were in most cases verbalized through a series of curses targeted against him. They were expressed without any kind of remorse and, apparently, with nobody from the family circle being preoccupied or able to prevent them from proliferating. According to Moca, in a very rough tongue the grandmother discriminated between nephews. She openly favoured those nephews she was fond of, the so - called "angels" simply because they were "not like this black one, [a veritable "buffalo offspring"] given birth by the Devil himself."⁶² Moca suggests that this demeaning and even persecutive attitude was motivated by the mixed Hungarian - Gypsy identity his grandmother had inherited. This biographical detail about the grandmother has a deeper social and cultural significance. It unveils the effects of internalized racism, in the same time being illustrative for other forms of cultural racism manifesting at regional level. Else said, Roma people from the present - days Mureş Country appear to have overtaken from the out-group (e.g., the Magyars) an antigypsy discourse, which came to be appropriated and instrumentalized in-group in a stigmatizing fashion.

In Moca's text, the portrait of the persecutive grandmother is overwhelming because her power position was not only relevant in-group but also out-group. To some extent, her witch crafts gave her agency in relation to the *Gadjo* world and inside the family environment, as well. One may suspect that in order to vindictively reply to the long discriminatory treatment, Moca chooses to compare the perpetrator - grandmother with a devilish hag. Accordingly, Moca writes that she had "magical powers and [was regarded by everyone as] a sister of the Devil. Some had seen her while hanging around in the graveyards", even at the age of 78.⁶³ Moca seems to be convinced that the grandmother was definitely "involved with impure matters"⁶⁴ which the author claims, she had passed on to the persecuted grandson, not before he had been, once again, cursed not to unveil these secret knowledge to anyone, or else he would be affected by "the

⁶² R. Moca, *O picătură de viață*, p. 7.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

evilness of her witchcraft.”⁶⁵ In Moca’s narrative, witchcraft is associated with a type of informal but trans-ethnic form of empowerment because it exploited the religious superstitions of the non-Roma and Roma people alike.⁶⁶ The grandmother’s notoriety of being into the possession of Demonic powers, cunningly exploited to find a large clientele, is evoked through two references to her demise. Moca writes that the grandmother died at the venerable age of 117 and that “nobody attended the funeral, frightened that something wrong might happen”⁶⁷, because, several years before, when she had turned 100 years old, she had found herself into clinical death and shockingly woke up from the coffin during the wake. Allegedly, in Moca’s text this incidence was only possible “due to the power of the Satan, which married her.”⁶⁸ One may suspect that through this framing of the grandmother’s image, Moca retrospectively gets revenge for the discriminations he had to endure in a childhood in a milieu where any human being would expect to find unconditioned love, protection and eventually basic spiritual guidance. Instead, he had received the opposite. However, some ambivalent episodes he chose to recollect cannot be understood independent of the stereotypical internal and external representations the old Gypsy woman.

In contrast, to the stereotypical and apparently transcultural representation of the “old hag” exploiting of the powers of the malevolent magic, the figure of the mother is the embodiment of a pious believer. From the beginning, she is fervently praying for the integrity of the author as an unborn child, because she already had buried two children.⁶⁹ In many respects, the micro-familial unit the child Moca belonged to is described as very impoverished. In the book, the elder members are described as struggling to align to the banal and elementary practices of a Christian family belonging to the traditional denominations. The author does not make a specific declaration of faith, but in the third person he narrates that: “the Christmas was about to come. The child never had a Christmas tree.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Marian Zăloagă, “Magia țigănească. De la șarlatanie la procesul de disciplinare socială a lumii săsești în secolele XVIII-XIX”, in Toader Nicoară (ed.), *Disciplinarea socială și modernitatea în societatea modernă și contemporană (sec. XVI-XXI)*, Cluj - Napoca, Editura Accent, 2011, pp. 42-63; Ioan Pop-Curșeu, “The Gypsy-Witch: Social-Cultural Representations, Fascination and Fears”, in *Revista de Etnografie și Folclor/ Journal of Ethnography and Folklore*, New Series, No. 1–2, 2014, pp. 23-45; Marius Căldăraru, *Particularitățile Misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în Comunitățile Romilor Căldărari*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2022, pp. 124, 188-190, 208, 243, 245.

⁶⁷ R. Moca, *O picătură...*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

The father bought a small one, and adorned it with painted nuts and tinsel made of coloured craped paper, biscuits and some apples...The child looked after only by the guardian angel and the Santa Claus, kneeled in front of the wonder tree, put his clasped hands for a prayer and uttered «Înger-Îngerașul meu» (My guardian little angel) the prayer his mother taught him.”⁷⁰ This evocative episode from the age of six years old is able to suggest that in the rural milieu, even in the ethnic Roma families, the basic familiarization with the Christianity, in terms prayers, would occur in the domestic life and was a self-assumed task of the women.

The meeting of another feminine character, namely Rudolf Moca's wife is recollected in almost pious and religious terms and regarded as a divine bless. The marriage with a woman “baptised with the name of the Saint Mary”⁷¹ is recorded in very precise temporal parameters, however, without any reference to the religious ceremony. The event occurred in the 1970s when the process of urbanization may have brought along a tendency of secularization, therefore, one may only presume that the event consisted only of a civil marriage. The supposition may be indirectly validated by the auctorial silence on this matter. On the other hand, the wife's passing is narrated as a veritable Christian martyrdom after a painful battle against cancer. Moca wrote: “On April 14, 1990, after the habitual hygiene, Maria refused to eat anything. [...] suddenly, she asked me to bring the Bible and read from it. I took the Holy Book from the shelf and randomly open it. It opened to The Psalms, I read,” and she, reportedly, asked him to listen to her last words “without interruptions”.⁷² This very intimate episode of separation and grief, is relevant because it indicates that an urbanised Roma family was in the possession of a Bible. The author considers it irrelevant to provide any information about the acquisition of the book. Being in their ownership, immediately after the fall of the communism, may suggest that in the new historical context the access to religious artefacts and to religious literature became a more facile matter. Looking at things in an even more autobiographical key, the possession of the Bible seems to have been regarded, also in a Roma family, as a protective and benedictory item. It was expected to provide with spiritual assistance and emotional relief for those family members confronting with an inevitable demise. Being read it involves it has not just a talismanic value, but the owners were, to a certain degree, convinced of its divine message.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 28.

The description of the burial of his wife is significant from several reasons. Moca recalls that “according to her expressed will, the body was taken to the native village and put to rest next to the remains of her father who died exactly on her birthday on February 2nd. The grave was covered with thousands of flowers. A cross and a plate to the remembrance of those who would be eventually passing by «Here rests, into God, Maria Moca. She lived 42 years!»”⁷³ Besides the dramatic effect, the biographical episode conveys something about the lived religion of ordinary Romanian Roma. Moreover, in a context when religious freedoms were regained and the assertiveness of confessional belonging could accompany it,⁷⁴ the Transylvania Roma author remains silent about the confessional belonging of the wife. Instead, Moca prefers to tell the story of an ordinary Roma family from the village Crăești (Adâmuș) which for generations buried their deaths in the local parish graveyard. Unlike many studies on Roma, outlining the practice of the exclusion from the consecrated ground, Moca’s deposition suggests that the non- Roma local community did not embrace such a stigmatizing attitude. It contradicts the data delivered by some social studies which claim that the phenomenon has occurred frequently in Transylvania and Romania in the long historical run.⁷⁵

Another family moment which can hint to the lived religion of Moca’s Roma family refers to the wedding ceremony of his daughter. He recounts that it was arranged as a princely event, the bride being led to the church in a four horse - drawn carriage, according to the wishes of the adored mother and wife.⁷⁶ Again the confessional belonging of the Moca’s family members remains obscured. What appeared to be relevant to mention is that the event was deployed under the auspices of an institutionalised religious actor. Although staged in an extravagant manner - that may be understood as an attempt to compensate for the internalised stigma of the marginalized people facing years of impoverishment -, the fugitive information about the wedding indirectly suggests an integrative inclination illustrated by the adoption of conformist religious practices customary to the normative cultures. Moca’s life - narrative does not suggest the manifestation of an overt structural racism rooted in the religious institutional dogmas and / or manifesting in the local parishes’ practices. Yet, he hints that antigypsyism can be identified in

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁷⁴ Ioan Popoviciu & Salomea Popoviciu, “Liderii religioși. Evoluții alternative: de la țiganul păcătos la țiganul mântuit”, in Elena Zamfir, & Vasile Burtea (eds.), *Prezent și perspective în cultura romă în viziunea intelectualilor, liderilor și oamenilor de succes romi*, București, CNCR Romano Kher & ICCV 2012, pp. 125-138.

⁷⁵ Sorin Gog & Maria Roth, “The Roma People of Romania”, pp. 389, 391.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

the cultural discourses of the majorities which has consequences in the process of self-validation of the ordinary Roma. He repeatedly testifies to have encountered and experienced racial discrimination. At first it occurred in - group and only later in life outside it, and it derived from the social shortages of the Roma family, and in this specific case, was also a consequence of Moca's skin tone which made him easily identifiable as an archetypal "Gypsy". However, broadly speaking, the autoethnographic text published by Rudolf Moca infers that the discriminating powers of an adopted biased discourse may be, eventually, fought back by means of acculturations, spiritual guidance and popular debates with religious content. The series of broadcastings with parish priests from different communities available on line is also telling for Moca's effort to build bridges and question negative stereotypes in a dialogic manner.⁷⁷

Valeriu Nicolae's voice on the splintering power of the prejudices against the Gypsies

Valeriu Nicolae presents himself as an in-group voice who was born in an ethnically mixed Romanian - Roma family from the multi-cultural Banat region. However, he grew up mostly in the southern part of Romania where, from the point of view of religious affiliation, most of the population was Orthodox. Similarly, to Moca he also experienced discrimination due to his blackness and to the family's social - economic precarity. Like in Moca's volume the recurring reference to the angels represents a metaphor employed to suggest the alleged cultural and moral superiority of whiteness. Basically, the antagonism between the angels (i.e. the white people/non-Roma) and the vampires (i.e. the blacks/the Roma) represents the backbone of his ironic but symbolic representation of the world as an adult assuming a prevailing Roma ethnic identity. Societal racism against the Roma is, hence, expressed in these imaginary semi-religious terms. References to angels appear in the reverie of his uncle Gogu who had fallen in love with a Romanian girl and who in revolt, after

⁷⁷ It is interesting that most of them are engaged with local parish priest belonging to the main religious actor in Romania, that is the Romanian Orthodox Church. See: #RomoSapiens cu părintele-paroh Silviu Feier de la Biserica Ortodoxă cu Hramul Sf. Ierarh Nicolae <https://fb.watch/mKHLaPPnua/>; Despre rânduielile, obiceiurile și datinile creștinești ale sărbătorilor de iarnă <https://fb.watch/mKHyBiQID9/>; Spiritul duhovnicesc al preotului-protopop <https://fb.watch/mKHBjNmHre/>; Diferența dintre Taina Sfântului Botez și Rânduiala Bobotezei (Sfințirea caselor) va fi explicată - pe înțelesul tuturor - de Părintele: Vasile Iağăr <https://fb.watch/mKHDnkH0oc/>; În Întâmpinarea Sfintelor Paști! Biserica Ortodoxă -II- Iernut, cu Hramul „Sf. Nicolae”, - preot - paroh , părintele Stavrofor Silviu Feier <https://www.facebook.com/1301915771/videos/10225777530127266/> [last accessed 30.08.2023].

confronting with societal prejudices, chose to go in the mountains to find God and to stab him to death. After being found almost in a state of revelation, the uncle was repeating “«here come the angels» they are not white, they are exactly like us the Gypsies – brownish but with wings.”⁷⁸ Such passage which obviously transgresses reality suggests that fighting racism can be an irrational undertaking which would end up with the loss of one’s mind or have even worse consequences. To give more consistency to this personal belief, Valeriu Nicolae narrates the story of Liliana a young Roma girl who wanted to be white and escape rejection. She also fails to achieve this symbolic transgression because she accidentally died in a mountain trip. The episode recounting Liliana’s destiny finishes with the Valeriu Nicolae’s comment: “angels are too white for the Gypsies, we got stuck with the vampires.”⁷⁹ However, despite recognising the fatal risks brought by the endeavour to confront an internalized dichotomic cultural representation, Valeriu Nicolae states that “the mixing up between the angels and the vampires may happen”, although it is a rare occurrence.⁸⁰ Such episodes in which the stigmatization of Roma is metaphorically explored by means of imaginary supernatural references bring evidence for the highly nuanced and very complex manner in which Valeriu Nicolae articulates his life - narrative as a Roma.

Before going further with the discussion about the religious references interposed in the autoethnographic volume which Valeriu Nicolae has published in 2022, I find it useful to refer to several of his previous publications. In my opinion this is imperative since some of his articles may be revealing for his understanding on how antigypsyism could be conceptualised and how it has shaped Romanies’ personal and collective attitudes with respect to the religious actors from Romania. There is also an additional argument that can support my taking into consideration of the articles preceding the highly biographical volume published by Valeriu Nicolae. I could notice that even in some of his academic publications, the author sees no contradiction to address antigypsyism in a caustic and also very personal manner.

Hence in an article published in 2002 in an academic journal Valeriu Nicolae stated: “I am a Gypsy. But I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that could ensure that I was well educated.”⁸¹ This statement outlines the awareness of the author of his privileged

⁷⁸ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, București, Editura Asociația Casa Bună, 2022, p. 260.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 267.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

⁸¹ Valeriu Nicolae, “Romanian Gypsies”, in *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 14, 4, 2002, p. 385.

position. It is uttered in such a manner to give personal stance to a conventionally detached academic text. Adoption of a compassionate tone implies a divorce from the power of argument of the positivist discourse and a definite step towards the re-humanization of the social research. For the sake of credibility, an in-group voice may find such a personalized testimony a more potent way to successfully raise societal awareness about the marginalized and unprivileged Roma people. In his studies, Valeriu Nicolae has underlined that “antigypsyism is able to adapt and Roma people remain targeted regardless of the changes”⁸² occurring in some sectors like the religious landscape or at the level of the polymorphous manifestations of the lived religion. Despite some inaccuracies in his argument with regard to the emancipation of the church slaves,⁸³ Valeriu Nicolae’s article is conclusive for the manifestation of everyday antigypsyism. In an affected manner, he narrates about how a “brother and a sister [ended] in the orphanage because their father is in prison for stealing a coffin to bury their mother. The village priest refused to provide a funeral for the woman unless they had a coffin although he was aware that they were not able to afford one.”⁸⁴ Several pages later, Valeriu Nicolae also illustrates the pseudo - religious but obviously racist discourse from the pages of an extremist right-wing party newspaper. He informs that “During the elections, [the newspaper] «România Mare» printed a Christmas carol whose lyrics stated that the Romanian people was requesting [Vadim] Tudor [the leader of the party] to get rid of the Gypsies, the Hungarians and the Jews.”⁸⁵ In another article authored by Valeriu Nicolae while he was a representative of the Roma at European institutions, he acknowledged that “European Roma are not a homogenous group. [...] Roma in Europe follow a number of different religions: Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant), Islam (both Shia and Sunni), Judaism, as well as atheism” and that the “prejudices against Roma are based not only on race, but on a combination - unique in each region or country - of religion, language, culture and physical appearance.”⁸⁶ In all the aforementioned texts, without being turned into a central points of reference, the religious biases continue to be recognized as elements able to give substance to the very “protean

⁸² Valeriu Nicolae, Towards a Definition of Anti-Gypsyism, (2006) at https://ergonetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Valeriu-Nicolae_towards-a-definition-of-antigypsyism.pdf [last accessed 06.10. 2022].

⁸³ Valeriu Nicolae, “Romanian Gypsies”, p. 386.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 388.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 392.

⁸⁶ Valeriu Nicolae, Towards a Definition of Anti-Gypsyism, (2006) at https://ergonetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Valeriu-Nicolae_towards-a-definition-of-antigypsyism.pdf [last accessed 06.10. 2022].

and polymorphous” anti-Roma discourses, ultimately to the antigypsyism.⁸⁷

In order to underline the harmful impact of an until recently ignored racial discourse, Valeriu Nicolae repeatedly underlines that what particularizes the antigypsyism is its historically demonstrated potential to dehumanize the targeted people.⁸⁸ In his academic articles, Valeriu Nicolae has demonstrated that the hate speech and grass-root practices directed against Roma can be traced in very mundane interactions. If this acute sense of stigmatization is highlighted from a personal perspective in peer - reviewed articles, where the author does not shy to use a first-person voice, it is unsurprising to see the matter similarly addressed in the autoethnographic publication, titled “Țigan. Țăndări” (Gypsy. Splintered into pieces).

Directly involved in policy making and in some charitable projects Valeriu Nicolae shares a bitter reflection on the immediate harsh realities he is witnessing on a daily basis. The autoethnographic feature of the “Țigan. Țăndări” is strengthened by the authors’ re-assertiveness of his belongingness to a marginalised minority. In sarcastic words, he upholds that “It is wonderful to be a Gypsy [...] partly human, partly animal, possessor of magical talents”⁸⁹ who must accommodate to the “disdain, rejection and the hate which are in fact a misunderstanding or a callous interpretation of a natural expression of the Christian love, actually, deployed to contribute to our «education».”⁹⁰ One may observe an unambiguous concord between the academic and non- academic texts in which Valeriu Nicolae addresses the topic of antigypsyism. In both sorts of publications, Valeriu Nicolae alludes that the racism against Roma can be diffusely rooted in religious beliefs and practices. The policies, the everyday attitudes and the practices towards the Roma are understood as “domestication” attempts undertaken by a normative and biased majority society. Considering the negative social effects as experienced by the targeted group, an ingroup Roma voice engaged in writing back may feel entitled to regard the non-Roma regulated system in which he needs to live as an unfair world “run by a sarcastic Divinity, [resignedly concluding that there] is no reason to expect it to be any different than it already is.”⁹¹

From the very first pages of his book, Valeriu Nicolae finds it significant to provide his readers with some reading keys. In this

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ Valeriu Nicolae, “Words That Kill”, in *Index on Censorship*, Volume 35, Issue 1, 2006, p. 137.

⁸⁹ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țăndări*, p. 416.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 417.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

respect he explains that the volume is organized in 50 chapters, the ones with prime numbers having a particular character while the rest being a mixture of fiction and residues of memories.⁹² The observation is significant since the author reiterates the mystical symbolism of the numbers, although he discloses to the readers that his formal education is leaning in the direction of the hard sciences. Correspondingly, Valeriu Nicolae refers to the number of books in the Catholic Bible, to the number of angels guarding the entrance to Hell as ascribed in the book of Quran, or to the numerological unit from the Bahai religion.⁹³ This speculative approach encourages him to uphold that “some hundred years ago, everything could be explained through magic. At the beginning of the Christian era the apostles were considered magicians. Jesus was a magician.”⁹⁴ Such religious references may seem erratic to most of the readers, but when considered within the overall organisation of the volume they emphasize the autoethnographic feature of the text. Mystical avowals appear to be appealed in order to advise a transcendental reading of the world. By incorporating these elements, the author hopes to be able to come closer to the cultural - spiritual peculiarities of an ethnic group he is identifying with. Else said, the construction of the self in the life - narrative would be incomplete without this belief in the supranatural dimension of life. Although they apparently may be contrasting with the rational superior education of the author, in fact, such beliefs are rather (re-)/called to complement his understanding of life. Indirectly, they would encourage the auctorial reconnection to the mysterious system of beliefs discursively associated to the Roma culture.

Like in the case of Moca's life - narrative, a feminine member of the family is designated to have been in the possession of magical powers. In this respect Valeriu Nicolae writes about his aunt Geta, who “was a toxic witch. And then she realised we were so much similar, only that I was younger and smarter. The tradition has it that the witchcraft is inherited on feminine line only. She had noticed that when I was angry with my mother she got ill, [...] that I was able to cure the dogs, that I came into possession of knowledge about the human bodies and the plants without having to learn too much about them.”⁹⁵ In line with the magical powers stereotypically attributed to the image of Roma woman,⁹⁶ Valeriu Nicolae, recalls an entire dynasty

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 5, 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ I. Pop-Curșeu, “The Gypsy-Witch...”, pp. 23-45; Marian Zăloagă, Die ‘Zigeunerin’ als ‘Hexe’. Eine Analyse der gegenwärtigen und historischen Dimension eines Diskurses und seiner Bedeutung für Identität, in Herbert Uerlings & Iulia-Karin

of witches from his own family: “the great grandmother was a medicine doctor and a witch in our village [...] mother and the sister Geta have learned a lot of things from her, among which how the mushrooms have to be harvested and particularly which of them have a hallucinatory effect”. [However, more than her sister, aunt Geta] “has inherited the talents of the grandmother and has become a nurse and a witch.”⁹⁷ On an amusing tone, the author mentions that the mushroom recipes served to the multi-ethnic feminine clientele were essential for the exploitation of the naivety of the women “who were laughing a lot with Geta and listened to all the silly things they heard from her.” Notably, Nicolae divulges the ethnicity of the clientele, German and Hungarian, but also Roma women, designated as “co-ethnics who came over for a gossip or to remove a spell.”⁹⁸ In another places, the witchcraft skills attributed to aunt Geta are approached in an apparent ironical tone. Accordingly, “Geta also predicts the future in a cup of coffee, in cowries and does everything the women from Caransebeș, with no access to psychotherapy or to a psychologist, might be in need of.”⁹⁹ Again, the feminine magic as practiced by the aunt is presented as a sheer exploitation of some weaknesses encountered among a feminine clientele whose lived religiosity was confounding with a set of superstitious beliefs and practices. There is no hint to a potentially malevolent magic, but the entire performance of the aunt is interpreted as a process of emotional deliverance to the benefit of a playful clientele driven by sheer naivety. In a specific circumstance, the author himself actively and vocally dismantles Geta’s fortune telling, claiming that he “was not a Gadje” to be fooled around by such occult practices. However, his strong convictions that all these feminine practices were nothing but ridiculous beliefs could be reconsidered in the context when he narrates a life episode concerning a love affair with a Jewish - American upper-class female. Her name started with K. and his age and the date of meeting also coincided with the aunt’s foretelling, hence, prompting the author of the autoethnographic texts to transiently question his rationalist *Weltanschauung*.

The comprehension of the episodes where the magic is dealt with, reveals a Roma author who may adopt an ambivalent attitude. In my opinion, this is telling for Valeriu Nicolae’s *in-between situatedness* and for the inner confrontation going on between his

Pătruț, (eds.), *‘Zigeuner’ und Nation*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Verlag, 2008, pp. 551-569.

⁹⁷ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, p. 84.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 90-91.

Gadje education and the process of self - identification with the Roma culture and spirituality.

Generally, the flexible approach to religiosity seems to be motivated by a set of traumatizing biographical occurrences. In Valeriu Nicolae's word "The Sundays were particularly cursed days [in my family, because] the alcoholic talents of my father collided violently with the professional obsessive talents of my mother."¹⁰⁰ Mundane troubles turned the weekly holidays into a perfect context for domestic conflicts which had not been prevented by the attendance of any member of the family to the religious services, regardless of the confession. It remains unclear whether the remoteness of the church from domicile of the Roma family, the lack of catechization or the indifference of the parish priest and of the Roma themselves, were standing behind this estrangement attitude in relation to the church/(es). Unlike sociological studies exploiting narrative interviews with Roma and non-Roma,¹⁰¹ Valeriu Nicolae is not interested to pinpoint a clear cause. However, speculations can be advanced since the autoethnographic productions basically invites the reader to personally get involved with the text.

Therefore, although the representatives of the traditional churches could choose not to get involved with the catechisation of the Roma during the communist and/or the post-communist times, the idea of religious indifference cannot be extended to all the Romanies mentioned in Valeriu Nicolae's book. In this respect, the author recounts how his mother reacted to a neighbour who cursed her lad by referring to the churchly act of viaticum (i.e. "grijania").¹⁰² On the other hand, going to church required a certain sartorial code many Roma would not afford. Possibly, the non - attendance to the church services of the Romanies accounted for in the book could have been motivated by the precarity of material condition they were confronting with. This supposition is indirectly suggested by an episode in which Valeriu Nicolae illustrates the level of everyday poverty in a marginal neighbourhood. Over there, according to the inhabitants' understanding - adopted as an acceptable point of view by the author himself -, "if you see someone in a suit it means either he went out begging, or was involved into evangelization."¹⁰³ In theory, this would work as an acceptable explanation which might motivate

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹⁰¹ Octav Cristea, Puiu Lățea, Liviu Chelcea, "Stigmatul etnic la o comunitate de rromi", in *Romanothan. Studii despre rromi*, Vol. 1, No.1, 1997, p. 65; Sorin Căce, Cristina Tomescu, Daniela Cojocaru, "The Role of Religion in Several Roma Communities", p. 175; Sorin Gog & Maria Roth, "The Roma People of Romania", p. 391.

¹⁰² Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, p. 146.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

why Roma have chosen not to attend the customary gatherings of the traditional churches. By being absent, they prevented to be judged by the normative parish members or by the parish priest and would not suffer the effects of stigmatization and exclusion.

Nonetheless, it is likely that non-attendance to the church services would be simply a personal choice. At a certain point, Valeriu Nicolae mentions that he preferred to avoid interactions with an old friend who, he learned, “*went crazy with the religious matters.*”¹⁰⁴ Hence, he suggests that the avoided person has turned into a religious bigot. However, in the act of remembering the youth good year, the author agrees that there was something he had found appealing to religion, namely, specific religious edifices. He recalls that in Caransebeș he enjoyed “going, from time to time, to the Catholic church from the city centre, which was the most beautiful thing I had known”, the place of worship having also a family significance, as it was the church where his cousin Karina, born in a mixed Swabian - Roma family, had been baptised.¹⁰⁵

The attitude towards religious ceremonies is also recalled as fluctuating in time. As an individual Valeriu Nicolae could adopt either an infantile - exploitative or a pious – conformist attitude. In the first case, he describes how he initiated a friend to exploit the funerary convoys by blocking the way to the graveyard and asking for money in return.¹⁰⁶ Respectively, when he recollects the tragedy of Monica, an impoverished woman who died after a hard life and an unsuccessful series of seven surgeries, Valeriu Nicolae wrote: “today I have been together with Alex to buy what is required for the burial.”¹⁰⁷ All these personal positionalities and practices transcend definite religious affiliations which are rarely disclosed. They can only be envisaged due to the popular rituals mentioned or preformed, not exactly out of conviction but rather as mimetically reproduced customs. Commonly, the episodes that narrate manifestations of lived religion are expressed in supra-confessional and/or in ecumenical manner. Frequently, familiar or incidental Roma and non-Roma characters in Valeriu Nicolae’s life - narrative are described as being adepts of a similar approach to religiosity. However, when the author is returning to his personal convictions, the matter may eventually touch agnostic overtones.

In the autoethnographic volume, religious institutions and sites are considered only in challenging life situation when a pragmatic and immediate solution was expected. A good example in

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

this respect is the episode encountered in the United States of America, when in a desperate circumstance the young Romanian Roma migrant found a telephone number and called the Chicago based “Romanian church and asked for help” and in a short period of time he was able to find a starting job.¹⁰⁸ However, with a detached nonchalance Valeriu Nicolae does not bother to explain or to justify himself and also does not bother to gainsay the long lasting accusation that Roma have been profiteers in religious matters.¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, during his staying in Chicago he had the chance to interact with a converted to Christianity Jewish layer who challenged him to discuss about his religious affiliation. The author narrates that she regarded herself to be a good Christian, therefore, considered it essential to insist on this topic since she had invited him into her opulent house. Valeriu Nicolae’s self-referential answer is formulated to represent a dismantling of her biased categorical thinking and of her implicit blind confidence in the divine blessing as reflected by her material affluence. He answered: “I have no damn idea what I am. God is a matter that works sensationally in moment of desperation, fear, hope – and as I am here - I supposed I am in a way connected to God. But does it make me a Christian, I am not sure about this?”¹¹⁰ Indirectly, Valeriu Nicolae suggests that certainties in this field would be impossible for him to formulate or to publicly affirm. In a defensive reply, he turns the casual discussion into a contestation of the American Christianity stressing that he noticed that the capitalism has corrupted the essential ideas of the founder and of the propagators of this system of beliefs. He felt it was legitimate to “judge the hypocrisy of the priest and the pastors or of the politicians who claim that your society is built on the word of God. In the end, [he stated] who is truly right, Saul who said he was inspired by Jesus, or Nietzsche reasoning that Saul was the biggest impostor?”¹¹¹ Wherefore such a critical philosophical interlude received a place in his life narrative? Possibly because of his ethnic identity, or, of his, at that time, social precariousness. Both could nurture his personal awareness that too strong beliefs and the social categorising that are related to religious doctrines and thinking are more likely to lead to all sort of discriminations. However, personally, Valeriu Nicolae seems to withstand the idea of formal assimilation through religious affiliation, although, he does not doubt the genuineness of the process. In this respect, he does not omit to

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 305.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew T. Loveland & Delia Popescu, “The Gypsy Threat Narrative: Explaining Anti-Roma Attitudes in the European Union” in *Humanity & Society*, 40, No. 3, 2016, pp. 334, 339-340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597615601715>

¹¹⁰ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, p. 313.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 317.

mention that the American Jewish female companion was listening to Catholic musical repertoire while she was jogging and lost her *Walkman*¹¹² which ultimately led to their re-encounter. Yet, as a Roma ethnic, he considers himself morally entitled to reply to any form of discriminatory practices by constantly interrogating every set of categorical thinking.

Valeriu Nicolae proves unfailing in rejecting bigoted religious discourses. He chooses to do so not only in the morally debauched America but also in other parts of the globe in contexts in which he would be expected to empathize with the groups facing everyday undignified treatments. He recalls an episode in the West Bank, where he witnessed the effects of the political, ethnic and religious radicalism among the young educated Palestinians. He recalls how, in his presence, they were joyfully celebrating when a local radio station broadcasted the death of some blown up Jewish soldiers. This attitude from the part of the victims of discrimination, generated an almost bodily outrageous reaction followed by a semi-religious reflection formulated by Valeriu Nicolae on his way to the airport. He noted: "I am looking to the Jewish, the Muslims and the Christian cemeteries from the Mount of Olives. I recollect the belief that the state of the body when we die will be like that at the Last Judgement and that we shall strive to be buried as close as possible to the eastern gate of Jerusalem which will hasten the rebirth [...] I am shattered inside. I wish, if it was possible, to be born again. I know it is impossible. Nevertheless, I would like to."¹¹³ Perhaps this episode illustrates best the author's assessment of three religious systems (e.g. the Judaism, Christianity and Islamism) textually related. Indirectly, the Romanian Roma author suggests that these religious systems seem to have failed their mission because in everyday context they apparently generate antagonistic, even deadly relations.

There has become customary in the academic literature to adopt a comparative approach with respect to antisemitism and antigypsyism and to look at the religious roots of the cultural prejudices targeting these ethnic groups.¹¹⁴ However, in his autoethnographic text, Valeriu Nicolae tends to look at the rhetoric of

¹¹² *Ibidem*, p. 310.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 304.

¹¹⁴ Antisemitism and antigypsyism have been lately examined in the context of the Holocaust research. Both are understood by historians as policies of ethnic cleansing. In the Romanian historiography a comparative approach had been undertaken by: Vladimir Solonari, *Purificarea Națiunii, Dislocări forțate de populație și epurări etnice în România lui Ion Antonescu, 1940-1944*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2015, pp. 245-267; Viorel Achim, "Die Zwangsarbeit der deportierten Juden und Roma für die Wehrmacht in Transnistrien", in Dieter Pohl & Tanja Sebta (eds.), *Zwangsarbeit in Hitlers Europa. Besatzung, Arbeit, Folgen*, Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 2013, pp. 271-292.

the secular or of the religious representatives as unconvincing. This positionality prevents Valeriu Nicolae to be in tune with the victimary rethoric adopted by other historically persecuted groups. Accordingly, Valeriu Nicolae narrates an episode that occurred to a conference in the admittedly beloved Italy. He wrote: “A rabbi pop who was struck by inspiration talks as if he wants to win the world championship of emphatical talking about our relation to divinity. Overwhelmed with piety, I am rather thinking how nice would be to have right here a nice barbeque party with some music played by the cousin Guță or by Mr. Salam.”¹¹⁵ By trifling grave matters of the contemporary times, Valeriu Nicolae displays an assumed anticlerical position and concurrently his adherence to the idea of a highly intimate and genuinely tolerant and depoliticized religious experience. In Nicolae Valeriu’s life - narrative there is no room for a conformist discourse comparable to that dedicated by the non - Roma academia or by the Roma activists to the persecution of the minorities. On the contrary, the conference episode illustrates the author’s non-alignment to the cultural conventionalities agreed upon in the elite milieus and voiced by religious or secular representatives.

Rather than adjusting his life - narrative as an ethnic Roma so that it could be perfectly in tune with the studies dedicated to the social and religious cast-offs, Nicolae prefers to adopt a derisive attitude. He proceeds in this manner even when he refers to the religiosity of his adored mother. He calls her the “main priest - women of the god Ajax”, because every Sunday she used to ritualistically refresh the floor rugs.¹¹⁶ The hint to an act of penance can be straightforwardly deduced. Going even further on this line, in his effort to escape the dryness of the clerical (i.e. the rabbi of Florence) discourse, Nicolae accounts that he preferred to contemplate, almost in an animistic way, the Dolomites mountains panorama. The scenery is compared to the visual representation of “The Abduction from the Seraglio” as known from a kitschy wall carpet hanged on the walls of many Romanian and Romanian Roma families. Derisively the author explains that the representation could be mistakenly regarded as a religiously themed icon, which “my mother used to worship during Ceausescu’s time, when we were not in the possession of the 68 icons and the 43 «Last Supper» pictures which we acquired immediately after the 1989 Revolution. Luckily, several years later, my mother converted to neo-Protestantism and we got rid of all these. Only my father continued to be a dedicated worshiper of the demijohns despite all the wishes and prayers” of the desperate wife.¹¹⁷ The personal

¹¹⁵ Valeriu Nicolae, *Țigan. Țândări*, p. 356.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 357.

mocking overtone is noticeable. In the story telling process this kind of humoresque overtones may have a therapeutic effect that is, essentially, the aim of almost all life – narrative texts.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, such pieces of private information can be regarded as hints towards the religious revivalism¹¹⁹ that occurred in the recent period in Romania and answered to the crave for religious practices partly hampered to manifest during the communist times. Taking as sample the religiosity of his own mother, Valeriu Nicolae's testimony reveals a continuity and, at the same time, a progressive readjustment of the lived religiosity during the period of transition from a repressive political regime to a democratic one. During the Communism regime and several years after this bygone authoritarian regime, the spiritual needs were poignant enough to lead to various forms of idolatrous manifestations. During the early post-communist years, it could consist in a propensity to purchase popular cult objects which came to decorate the entire domestic space. The owners expected that their possession would help them to overcome everyday problems occurring in- and outside the family milieu. Later, with the liberalization/diversification of the religious landscape in post-communist Romania, the phenomenon of conversion to neo-protestant churches gained solid ground in the Roma communities.¹²⁰ Without being specific about what confession did the mother adopt, the brief note in the pages of "*Țigan. Țândări*" is able to attest a transit from idolatrous/non-canonical forms of religiosity to the familiarization with the biblical text, a phenomenon embraced not only by a member of the family but surely by many other Roma

¹¹⁸ See: Hans Renders, "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing Where Biography Shifts into Life Writing" in Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds.) *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Revised and Augmented Edition, (With a Foreword by Nigel Hamilton), Leiden Boston, Brill, 2014, pp. 172-734; Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography...*, p. 246; Jillian A. Tullis, "Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research...", p. 106.

¹¹⁹ Mălina Voicu and Andreea Constantin, "Religious Revival in Romania: Between Cohort Replacement and Contextual Changes", in Gert Pickel, Kornelia Sammet (eds.), *Transformations of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989 – 2010*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2012, pp. 155-166; Cerasela Voiculescu, "Nomad Self-Governance and Disaffected Power Versus Semiological State Apparatus of Capture: The case of Roma Pentecostalism" in *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2017, pp. 188–208.

¹²⁰ Most complex studies in this respect are the following: László Fosztó, *Ritual Revitalisation after Socialism. Community Personhood and Conversion among Roma in a Transylvanian Village*, Münster, LIT Verlag, 2009; Joahannes Ries, *Welten Wanderer. Über die kulturelle Souveränität siebenbürgischer Zigeuner und den Einfluß des Pfingstchristentums*, Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2007; Martin Olivera, *Romanes. Tradiția integrării la romii gabori din Transilvania*, Cluj – Napoca, Editura ISPMN, 2012; Ioana Bunescu, *Roma in Europe. The Politics of Collective Identity Formation*, London & New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 127-160.

converts. Whether this act of conversion was a personal attempt to escape stigma by integration in a new community of faith, as the sociologists of religion have asserted,¹²¹ or a manifestation of agency of the Roma individuals by replying to the marginalization of the normative churches, it is only to be speculated. In this respect, Valeriu Nicolae chose to leave the topic unelucidated and to the unbounded interpretation of the readership. The reader of his autoethnographic text is invited to give meaning to the specific episode and to the processes related to the Romanies' religious conversion. At any rate, it is obvious that in his book Valeriu Nicolae keeps deliberate distance from becoming directly or indirectly a promoter of any religious groups. Thus, the author avoids any antagonization with the nationally dominant traditional religious actor and at the same time expresses his own stand with respect to the free exercise of religion.

Throughout the text, various narrated episodes unveil an auctorial voice who openly rejects power relations partially deriving from the religious precepts and doctrines operating at national or international level. As a Roma ethnic, familiarized with the effects of stigmatization and rejection, Valeriu Nicolae feels entitled to make his point based on his immediate experiences, thus, turning his subjectivity into a public contestation and an invitation to the readership to approach life and the religious affairs in a non-doctrinarian manner.

Final Remarks

Contemporary readership is living in a self-proclaimed secular world and is expected to make sense of the self and of the world around by means of a rationalist type of narrative. Yet, even in this context, lived religion, religious affiliations and identity discourses associated with them are far from being socially and culturally insignificant. In fact, they seem to be very resourceful and are credited to have favoured the manifestation of a particular identity of the heterogenous Roma transnational project. Recently, there has been noted a propensity of the Romanian Roma elites to emancipate themselves from the discursive hegemonies of the past. By means of various publications, Roma elites took it decisively on the pathway of decolonization of knowledge production and the emancipation of the minds and souls. Whether this process will be achieved or not by

¹²¹ Sorin Căce, Cristina Tomescu, Daniela Cojocaru, "The Role of Religion in Several Roma Communities...", pp. 162, 165; Sorin Gog & Maria Roth, "The Roma People of Romania...", p. 394.

means of the increasing academic literature, this is a matter that, for the moment, can hardly receive a positive answer.

Nonetheless, are the life - narrative publications more appealing and consequently more suitable to support a veritable in-group process of ethnic emancipation and collective assertiveness? To a certain extent, my excursion into the autoethnographic writings of Rudolf Moca and Valeriu Nicolae may be taken as a proof that this endeavour can be auspiciously undertaken. Overall, in their books the two in-group voices are relating episodes from their existence as discriminated Roma individuals. Inevitably, their positioning towards religious and spiritual matters differs and are plotted according to profound auctorial subjectivity. In his text, Moca tends to show that familiarity with the traditional local religious customs has been able to facilitate a degree of social inclusion of the Roma people. On the other hand, Valeriu Nicolae is tackling the matters in a less clichéd and subordinated manner which may betray also personal iconoclastic stances. By his multiple references associated with various life circumstances, he is more likely to throw a more complex light on the possible attitudes available to a Roma individual when one encounters religious traditions and/or strives to concoct a distinct spiritual life-style.

On the whole, the printed productions authored by Rudolf Moca and Valeriu Nicolae bring evidence that at the level of their life experiences “hybridised practices of the lived religion can be highly personalised, offering the individual a personal agency.”¹²² In both cases, more or less canonical manifestations of spirituality and religiosity are recalled fugitively or comprehensively. There are some common tropes that have recurrence in their autoethnographic writings. A central one is represented by the exploration of witchcraft. The authors’ insistence on this topic may have at least two explanations. First, these practices are associated with the figure of some close feminine relatives. Secondly, they represent confirmations of long time reiterated cultural discourses drawing on the Romanies’ religious and social anomie. Manifesting either in relation to members from the in-group or from the out-group, the reference to occult beliefs and practices can be understood as a form of agency available to a disparaged and at the same time exoticized Roma culture.

However, when it comes to the spirituality and the lived religion practices and beliefs, the texts of the two Romanian Roma are not exclusively focused on these obscure practices. In many contexts, Roma women can be observed to be explicitly or implicitly acting as agents of religious inclusion, respectively, of religious dissidence. However, contrary to the narratives collected and epitomized by the

¹²² N. T. Ammerman, “Lived Religion as an Emerging Field...”, p. 87.

cultural and social researcher as reliable insights into the collective religiosity of the ordinary Romanian Romanies, none of the episodes referring to religion or religiosity, recollected in the autoethnographic texts under scrutiny, can indicate social emancipation achieved by means of conversion of the individuals or the communities sharing this ethnic background. Undeniably, expressions of religious bricolage¹²³ can be traced in these narratives. One can also identify a degree of confessional elusiveness or even indifferentism which appears to be common to both autoethnographic texts. Finally, even relatively vague expressions of anticlericalism - engendered by the awareness of active and/or passive participation of the Christian culture to the dehumanization of the Roma people in the long historical run -, never end up uttering antagonist attitudes of the Romanian Roma elites or the ordinary characters from the life narratives toward the traditional or newer religious actors.

¹²³ Mirel Bănică, *Bafta, Devla și Haramul. Studii despre cultura și religia romilor*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2019.