

**NEW ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN THE BALKANS:  
THE CASE OF THE EGYPTIANS**

*UDC 316.347:327.58(497)*

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**Abstract.** *After the Kosovo crisis the world discovered the existence of a new community, unknown till then. This was the community of the so called Balkan Egyptians. The international institutions (such as KFOR, UNHCR, OSCE and others), the non-governmental and human rights organizations and the mass media were puzzled and confused by this new phenomenon and they did not know how to react to it.*

**Key words:** *Romanies, Balkan Egyptians, Ashkali*

After the Kosovo crisis the world discovered the existence of a new community, unknown till then. This was the community of the so called Balkan Egyptians. The international institutions (such as KFOR, UNHCR, OSCE and others), the non-governmental and human rights organizations and the mass media were puzzled and confused by this new phenomenon and they did not know how to react to it.

However, it did not take them a long time to find the way. They rapidly declared this new community to be an "artificial creation" of Slobodan Milosevic and later on any mention of this community disappeared from all official documents. After a while this silent approach was replaced by the appellations "Roma and Ashkali", which also completely hide the existence of the "so called Egyptians" (Zülch, 1999). Recently, in official reports on Kosovo it is becoming conventional to write about "Roma, Ashkali and Kosovo Egyptians" (UNHCR/OSCE 2000; CERD 2000) with explanations that OSCE agreements make it clear that ethnic self-identification must be respected and that governments must respect how individuals and groups want to be identified in general and in censuses in particular.

The NGO's and humanitarian organisations working in Kosovo are completely perplexed by these communities and don't know which terminology to use to describe them. At the conference "The Kosovo conflict and the consequences on Roma from Kosovo" held from 16 to 18 June 2000 in Skopje the representatives of some international

aid organisations spoke about "different Roma communities - Roma, Egyptians and Ashkali". Such an approach, however, does not appeal either to the Roma or to the Egyptians and Ashkali.

The Roma community and political activists are vehemently resisting the emergence of "Egyptians" and actually see this phenomenon as a kind of separatism which weakens the aimed unity of Gypsies. They accuse international institutions of fortifying the gap between the different Roma groups through accepting the Egyptians and Ashkali. The Egyptians and Ashkali on the other hand are accusing the international institutions, NGO's, humanitarian organisations, foreign governments and the Roma community representatives of attempts of forced assimilation and destroying of their identity.

The situation is similar in the in the academic circles - some scholars (such as. Kurtiade, 1995), support the African origin of the Balkan Egyptians, but the majority do not doubt their Roma origin, but prefer to avoid this controversial issue. Scholar works about it are still an exception (Dujzings, 1997; Dujzings, 2000) and the issue is explained mostly in a rather naive manner by some scholar as well as by some human rights activist, who are unable to understand the issue at all (ERRC 1998: 34-38; Willems 1997: 1-3).

In order to understand the phenomenon of the so-called Egyptians on the Balkans one should be familiar with the history and folklore in this region in general, with the population, which the Balkan nations call with the general term Tsigani (we use as the English equivalent the term Gypsies) in particular and with some specifics of the Balkans. Before we begin, let us to mention some of them.

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First we would like to say that history and folklore traditions have a special place in the life of the Balkan nations, where the processes of ethno-national development began later than in Western Europe, in the nineteenth century, and are still active now. History here is not so much a science as part of the national mythology. Each nation on the Balkans has its own historical mythology dating back from most ancient times (most often from the cradle of world civilization), which reveals its glorious historical past. It is constantly resurrected and projected in different guises in modern times, especially in situations of crisis. Balkan nations have more closed lives - closed within the patterns and inferiority complexes of their historical past rather than open to the problems of the present and the perspective of the future. Folklore traditions are important to the Balkan nations because they are an integral part of the historical neo-mythology, which often makes use of their substance and arguments to explain contemporary problems.

The Gypsies on the Balkans are no particular exception to this situation; they do not live in a world of themselves. Due to their complex historical destiny they have always been an indelible part of the surrounding macrosociety. The etiological legends are a particularly well-developed and diverse genre, and the issue of their origin as a people is a primary question whose answer is sought on the level of folklore. We should not forget that unlike the other Balkan nations, Gypsies do not have official and institutionalized science and education, which is why the answers to this question have remained on this level for centuries.

Gypsy folklore, however, is not a completely closed, self-sufficient and self-developing system. It is strongly influenced by the "official" culture of the macrosociety

where Gypsies live, and respectively by the overall cultural and historical context on the Balkans. In particular, Gypsy etiological legends express the extremely complicated reflections between folklore and "official" culture, which either make use of typically archaic folklore plots, forms and approaches, joining them together with the respected and established religious images or "prove" them by the achievements of modern "scientific" knowledge.

A very frequent phenomenon in many legends is the relation between the origin and scattering of the Gypsies around the world with their mythical leaders and the "lost kingdom" theme located in ancient Biblical Egypt. Popular among Balkan Roma is the cycle of legends about the Gypsy "king Pharaoh" (Pharaon, Phiraun, Pheravin, etc.). Most variants of these legends were recorded in the first half of our century and quite a few of them are still popular today (Djordjevic, 1933: 122-123; Marushiakova & Popov, 1994: 22-31, 49-50). They tell about the kingdom of the Gypsies in Egypt, retell the story of Moses (or Misai), describe the popular Biblical theme about the parting of the sea, the escape of the Jews and the drowning of the soldiers of the Egyptian king.

This "Egyptian" cycle of legends has complex relations with the development of the social and political thinking of the Gypsies. The very idea of relating the origin of Gypsies to Egypt was established on the Balkans as early as XIII-XIV c. when various Byzantine sources were either divided or united about the two appellations "Atsingani" and "Egyptians" (Marushiakova & Popov, 2001). When they first came to Western Europe the Gypsies presented themselves as newcomers from Little Egypt. This idea persisted among Gypsies on the Balkans until later, during the Ottoman Empire, when in one of his descriptions of the Gypsies in the region of Nish in 1740 Johan Kampelen noted that they were proud of their Egyptian roots (Ionov, 1979:128-9).

The nineteenth century saw a new stage in the development of Gypsy historical awareness on the Balkans. Along with typical folklore forms enhanced by the authority of the Bible, attempts were made to explain the Egyptian origin of Gypsies with "scientific" arguments and thus to discuss their social emancipation problems. In 1866 Petko Ratchev Slaveikov, a famous Bulgarian poet and writer, published his article "The Gypsies" in the "Gaida" newspaper, published in Istanbul (Marushiakova and Popov 1995:36-45). The article derived the origin of Gypsies from ancient Egypt and declared them to be the people who had brought the achievements of civilization and scientific knowledge to ancient Greece, and the Gypsy language to be the language which had influenced Greek (including deriving the name of Athens from "atsingani"). The article was far from the prevailing scientific understanding of the origin of Gypsies at the time. It was rather a part of the intricate social struggle for an independent Bulgarian church, separate from the dominance of the Greek Patriarchy.

Nonetheless, there was an interesting "feedback" reflected in the influence of this article on the Gypsy community. In the following year, 1867, the new newspaper "Macedonia", edited by P. R. Slaveikov, published a "Letter to the Editor" from the town of Prilep (Macedonia), signed by "An Egyptian" (Marushiakova and Popov 1995:36-45). Based on the thesis about the origin of the Gypsies as an ancient people, developed by the newspaper editor, the author cited the Bible to claim that Gypsies had the right to have their own place in the Christian church. In the context of the church conflict on the Balkans back then (which continues to the present) the implication was that each nation (i.e. including the Bulgarians) should establish its own church.

The idea of each nation having its own church (like the idea of its own language and to a some extent the idea of its own alphabet as well) is perceived on the Balkans as proving a nation's right to exist as independent and equal to others. When we remembering this notion, we can understand the legends about Gypsies whose church was made of bacon (or cheese) - but they ate it (Djordjevic 1933: 29-30; Block 1936: 180), or another cycle of legends about the Gypsies who had their own alphabet, but the donkey ate it (Tong 1989: 169; Marushiakova and Popov 1994: 53 - 54).

These legends are popular both among the Gypsies and among the surrounding population. On the level of folklore they reveal the social status of Gypsies as being on a lower level (a public image which has still not undergone any considerable development). Sometimes there still is a mingling of separate themes, for example legends about the Jews hiding the Gypsy alphabet in a pyramid in the grave of king Pharaoh in Egypt (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 26-27; Studii Romani 1998).

In the example of the "Letter to the Editor" from "An Egyptian" (a Gypsy, Ilia Naumtchev, who later on became a clergyman in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church), the concept of the Egyptian origin of Gypsies transcended the level of folklore and reached the realm of community historical awareness (and more specifically the awareness of its leaders). It became an active argument in the civil movement for emancipation of the Romani community in as early as last century. This trend of development was not an isolated phenomenon. In the beginning of our century, during the struggle of Bulgarian Gypsies against the ban on voting imposed on many of the nomadic and settled Muslim Gypsies in 1901 (Marushiakova and Popov 1997: 29-30), this historical concept was predominant as we can see from the documents of the First Congress of the Gypsies in 1905, defined by its organizers as "Coptic". The documents of the congress were signed by the representatives of the "Coptic population". Another interesting issue is that the self-identification of the Gypsies as "Copts" has some ancient roots as well. In many documents of the Ottoman Empire between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries they were referred to as "Kipt" (i.e. Copts) (Marushiakova and Popov, 2000).

The first Gypsy organization in Bulgaria, established in 1919, (or 1921 according to other sources) also carried the name "Egypt" (Marushiakova and Popov, 1997:30). In the course of time, however, and under the influence of the surrounding population, the concept of their Indian origin gradually spread among the Roma. Very important for the development of Romani historical thinking is the penetration of the "Indian thesis" about their origin. This process is determined by the advance of modern scientific knowledge on the Balkans and more particularly the concept of ancient India as the ancient Romani motherland. The Balkan nations became familiar with these scientific theses for the first time in the second half of the nineteenth century. They gradually entered the public mind in the first half of the twentieth century, eventually reached the Roma and are now reflected in their legends.

The concept of ancient Egyptian origin remained on the level of folklore. In some instances there has been an interesting combination with contemporary geographical knowledge, for example "my grandfather came to Sofia from Egypt, passing through Spain and France" (Studii Romani 1997).

In other cases contemporary Romani intellectuals in their quasi-scholar research attempt to combine the two theses, the Egyptian and the Indian ones, in various modes. Typical in this respect are the works of Romani writers which present a complex and

comprehensive picture of the ethnogenesis of Bulgarian Roma - some of them, the so called "Turkish Gypsies" (i.e. Muslims) are descendants from slaves brought to the Balkans from Egypt by Julius Caesar; others are descendants of the Indian mercenaries of Emperor Trajan, who settled in Bulgarian lands. In the new lands these two population groups mixed with the descendants of the ancients Thracians and Illyrians and thus the new community was born - the Roma (the name derives from "Romei", i.e. Romans). Gradually some of them settled beyond the Danube and laid the beginning of the Rumanian people, yet others settled in Western Europe (Marushiakova and Popov, 1995: 46-48).

Tendencies towards religious and ethnic assimilation of the Gypsies by the predominant communities have always existed on the Balkans. These processes, either voluntary or under various types of pressure, have existed since the times of the Ottoman Empire and in more recent times in the ethno-national Christian Orthodox countries. Simultaneously with this process, as early as last century, tendencies emerged to demonstrate a different identity, neither Gypsy, nor the same as the identity of the surrounding society. This was a reaction against the pressure of assimilation, but also an attempt to avoid the widespread negative attitudes towards the Gypsies on the Balkans. For each Balkan nation the other nations may be (and almost always are) historical enemies, but they are still communities of the same rank, while the Gypsies have always been an exception: they are a community of the lowest order, incompatible with the others. That is why when Gypsies seek a new preferred identity, their search is always directed towards another minority, which has a higher social status than the Gypsy one, such as the Turks, Tatars and Vlachs (i.e. Romanians) in Bulgaria, the Turks and Vlachs in Greece, the Albanians, Turks and Vlachs in former Yugoslavia.

The adamant refusal of other minorities to accept the Gypsies has quite often led to a new "third" road of development (neither assimilation, nor preferred ethnic consciousness of other established minority), the creation of a new identity as the ultimate measure. Several variants of the quest for a "third road" of development, for search of new variants of identity, can be observed in some Gypsy communities with a non-Gypsy preferred identity.

In Bulgaria there live several communities of Turkish Gypsies whose mother tongue is Turkish, some of them have Turkish preferred self-identity, but because they are not accepted as "Turks" by the surrounding Bulgarian population or by the Bulgarian Turks, some of them prefer to call themselves simply "millet" (i.e. people) or "Muslims" which is considered to be a neutral ethnic category. They look for explanations of their own origins, and such phenomena can still be observed at all stages of development, sometimes in an increasingly obvious way. We can cite the example of "Usta Millet" in the region of the town of Dobrich, who are now beginning to create their "own history" according to which they are the descendants of an unknown tribe of blacksmiths from Afghanistan, who were the most famous gun-smiths at the time of the Ottoman Empire (Studii Romani 1999).

Another variation of this type of identity quest can be seen among some Khorakhane Roma (Turkish Roma) from the Ludogorie region. They say that they are descendants of people of Arab origin, from the Koreysha clan, who lived in Bulgaria in 1200-1300 A. D. Proofs for their existence can be seen in the Muslim tombstones all over the region (Russe, Razgrad, Silistra, Dulovo, Ispereh, Kubrat) dating from the reign of King Kaloyan

around 1205 A.D. (Studii Romani 1999). This is a repetition of a persistent historical myth of the Arab origin frequent also among Bulgarian Muslims (the so called Pomaks), which is based on a mistaken reading (whether it is deliberate or not is another issue) of the years on Muslim tombstones which, of course, are dated according to the Islamic calendar, and are interpreted according to the Christian one.

Similar case is this of the small community called "Madzhari" in Bulgaria. Madzhari are Bulgarian speaking and are considered to be Gypsies by the surrounding population. "Madzhari" are persuaded that they are descendants of Madzhars (Hungarians) who invaded Bulgarian lands in unknown past or according another version they are part of the first Proto-bulgarians (Studii Romani 1996, 2000).

The "Turkish Gypsies" (Muslims) have also a compromise variation in the explanation of their Arab origin. It combines this idea with the "Indian thesis". According to one recording from the region of the town of Sliven, the Gypsies have come from India but they are "hasil Arabs" (i.e. true Arabs). Their names are Arabic and since there is no great difference between the Indian and the Arab languages, it is easy to understand the words in Indian movies. This story is "confirmed" through a familiar traditional formula - according to the informant this was read in a secret book kept in the attic of his school, and that was why he was punished by the school principal (Studii Romani 1999).

The Rumanian-speaking Rudari in Bulgaria who are in a similar situation to the one of the millet have introduced new tendencies, so far mostly at the level of folklore. They are beginning to present themselves as "true Vlachs", or "the oldest Rumanians". One of their popular legends derives Rudari origin from their ancient kingdom on the Balkans. Following its destruction some of them crossed the Danube and laid the foundations of the Rumanian people, while their true direct ancestors, the Rudari of today, remained in Bulgarian lands. In some instances their explanations have already begun to follow the trail of quasi-historical knowledge, leaning on naive historical research (Ionov, 1998), which asserts the unity of Rudari with present day Rumanians; gradually this reasoning is acquired by the Rudari themselves, assisted by the efforts of the autodidact authors.

Similar is the development of the ideology of the political party Democratic Movement "Rodolyubie", registered in 1998. According to its leader this is the party of the Rudara and the word Rudara does not derive from the word "ruda" (ore) but from the word "rod" (family or clan in Bulgarian) because "we are descendants of the first old Bulgarian clans who settled in these lands together with Khan Asparukh at the time when the Bulgarian state was founded." (Studii Romani 1999)

The processes of identity changes and transformations in the Gypsy community never cease, but at present, under the new social and political conditions they develop particularly rapidly and to a certain extent with many contradictions.

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The ambitions of the Egyptians to distinguish themselves from the Gypsies (today already "Roma") and for the establishment of their own specific ethnic community are following the familiar models of ethnic mimicry (i.e. an unwillingness to declare their own identity and an acquisition of a preferred identity) of the Gypsies. For centuries the forbears of contemporary Egyptians have been perceived as Gypsies by the surrounding population, while they often chose to declare themselves as Albanians. Today, the fact

that they are following one of the above models of development, makes the process of ethnic emancipation and confirmation of Egyptian identity even more difficult. It also makes it difficult to distinguish them from the Roma and provides arguments to those who support the idea that these are former Roma who for one reason or another declare themselves as "Egyptians". There are examples of families whose members have different ethnic awareness, which only makes it even more confusing. A textbook example is the one of the three brothers who gathered for the circumcision of the son of one of them - one brother came from the USA and considered himself to be a Rom, the other came from Australia and considered himself to be an Egyptian and the third one lived in Macedonia and declared himself as Albanian (Studii Romani 1998).

It is believed that there are not convincing academic proofs for Non-Gypsy appurtenance of the Egyptians and we could hardly find many serious scholars doubting their Gypsy/Roma origin. However, it is of little importance to the community itself how scientifically justified are the theses about the origin of the "Egyptians", because on the Balkans each nation has its "own" historical school and positions on the key issues of historical knowledge, which almost never coincide with those of their neighbours. The goal here is not to discuss the ethno-genesis of the Egyptians, but to reveal the processes of their modern ethnic development, to see how a community has been founded, and how they enter the public space and find their place in it.

The "scientific" quest for the ethno-genesis of the "Egyptians" does not, however, emerge in a vacuum - to a great extent it corresponds to the legends of the "Agupti" living in the Rhodope mountains of Bulgaria, recorded in the 50's, where their origin was attributed to Egyptian slaves brought to the Balkans by the Roman soldiers (Primovski 1955: 248). The old well-known Egyptian thesis reflected in the legends is far from disappearing from the Balkans once and for all. On the contrary, it underwent a powerful secondary revival in the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania, where it was transformed to a new and qualitatively higher level.

Here we have in mind the processes in the communities of the "Egyptians", called with different appellations by the surrounding population, but most often "Gyupti" in Macedonia and Kosovo, "Magyupi" in Montenegro and Metohia and the "Yevgit" in Albania, in the last few decades. Their mother tongue is most often Albanian, very rarely (for example in Kichevo) it is Macedonian. Until then these communities were perceived as Gypsies by the surrounding populations for centuries (and we must say that in many instances they are still perceived as Gypsies by the surrounding populations now) (Müller, 1999). It seems that in their communities these processes have acquired a routine and new dimensions in the overall context of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the establishment of new states and nations.

These processes came to the surface in the 1970s with the first attempts to have a separate entry for "Egyptchani" (Egyptians) in the population censuses in former Yugoslavia, and in the republic of Macedonia in particular. From the very beginning the goal of the movement for ethnic emancipation of the Egyptians is their differentiation from the Roma and from the Albanians. That is why many of their representatives in the region of Ohrid identified themselves as "Toskari" in the 1971 population census in order to be different from their neighbours, the Albanians (speakers of the Gega dialect), and from the Roma. When the census data were processed, however, the people who put down "Toskari" were classified as Albanians based on the fact that this was an Albanian dialect.

In some parts of the country in this census the Egyptians declared themselves as Yugoslavians, in others as Muslims or Macedonian Muslims led by the logic of the determining factor of religious belonging, while in Eastern Macedonia sometimes they declare themselves simply as Turks.

The Egyptian movement received a new impetus after the new constitution of the SF Republic of Yugoslavia was passed in 1974 (Art. 166, 170). It established the right of every citizen to declare their own ethnic belonging. Some Egyptians remember that in the 1981 census some of them declared themselves as "Gyupci", but they were reclassified as "Roma", while others declared themselves as "Egypchani"(Egyptians) for the first time in Macedonia, but they were also not recorded in the census results and were classified as "others". It became clear that without having a special census entry (Egyptians) their existence would not be public knowledge. In order to achieve this special Egyptian classifications entry people started writing petitions not only in Macedonia but in Kosovo as well (nearly 4000 people signed a petition in Kosovo), which are being deposited with different levels of government officials.

The long struggle ended with success in the population census in 1991, when the Egyptian activists managed to persuade the Yugoslavian authorities to introduce the Egyptian entry in the census papers, thus actually recognizing their existence. According to an uncontested census from 1991, 3 307 people or 0,2 % declared themselves as Egyptians. (Friedman, 1993; Friedman, 1999). The Egyptians thought that this number was too low and did not correspond to the actual situation, they wrote other petitions and protests and finally managed to enter the media. The newspapers (first in Yugoslavia and then abroad) started writing about them – sometimes ironically and sometimes as sensational news – and often the interviews and reports about events gave the floor to the new ethnic community. The titles of some newspaper articles in Yugoslavia and Macedonia are rather eloquent - "Egyptians on the Territory of Yugoslavia", "The Egyuptsi are no Longer Roma", "The Egyptians are in the Census", "They are no Longer Albanians", "Egyuptsi - Egyptians from Ohrid and Struga", "Neither Albanians nor Roma", "Where are We, the Egyptians", "What is happening to the Egyuptsi", "Egyptians - a New Nationality", "Heirs of the Sun God", "Ohrid is Full of Pharaohs" ... (Zemon, 1996:61-85)

The struggle to establish the Egyptians as a separate community was headed by their new associations, first in Macedonia and later on elsewhere on the Balkans. In 1990 the "Egyptchani" association in Yugoslavia was founded with chairman Nazim Arifi and seat in Ohrid, Macedonia. 1990 was also the year when the founding congress of the Association of the Egyptians in Kosovo and Metohia was held with chairman Vesel Kadroli. At the same time an Egyptian club was founded in Belgrade which later on grew into the Union of Egyptians "Esnaf" (i.e.Guild), which was centered in Belgrade. In 1991 in Struga, Macedonia a political Egyptian party was founded - the Democratic Movement Party - led by Napoleon Kamberi from Struga, and in 2000 the second Egyptian political party in Macedonia was founded - "the Union of Egyptians".

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1992, based on the existing organisations of the Egyptians in Yugoslavia, their independent associations were founded in Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. In 1992 the leadership of the Egyptian association was headed by Usni Zemoski, and Nazmi Arifi remained chairman of honour. In 1994 Arslan Suleiman was elected chairman of the association (which was already an association of the

Egyptians in Macedonia), new regulations were adopted, new leaders elected.

In the same time a number of Egyptian cultural associations were established (such as "Pyramid" in Ohrid, "Cleopatra" in Struga, "Bela kula" (White Tower) in Kitchevo, a children's folklore group "Little Egyptian" in Ohrid. The Egyptian sports associations, founded earlier, were still active, such as Sports Club "Borec" (Fighter) in Kitchevo, which is considered the oldest one in Macedonia. More recently established clubs are "Crni Drim" in Struga and "Prespa" in Resen. The so called humanitarian associations (mutual aid associations) were also in the process of being established - the first such association was "Lake Ohrid" in Ohrid and "Struga" in Struga.

At the same time the ideas of separate Egyptian community were extended beyond the borders of former Yugoslavia and similar associations were also founded on the territory of Albania by the "Yevgit". The first one was founded in Korcha on June 28 1992, It was followed by regional associations such as the cultural and educational association "Orient" in Valona, a Students' Egyptian Association in Albania, which was later united in a Cultural association of the Egyptians in Albania "Nefreta" (i.e. Nefertiti), registered on March 22, 1993, with chairman Behar Sadiku. In 1992 a committee of the Albanian Egyptians was founded, which later on became the "Party for Equality, Dignity and Rights".

In 1998 the different Egyptian associations were formally united and in a congress in Ohrid the formation of the Balkan Union of the Egyptians was announced. The congress was attended by representatives of all existing organisations of the Egyptians from Macedonia, Albania and Serbia (Belgrade). The congress was not attended by representatives from Kosovo who at the last minute announced that they would not be able to arrive due to the uncertain political situation and Albanian pressure. Rubin Zemon from Macedonia was elected chairman of the Balkan organisation and Behar Sadiku from Albania became vice-chairman.

Parallel with these processes on the Balkans, another process also began - the formation of the various organisations of Egyptians among gastarbeiters, emigrants and refugees abroad (e.g. in Switzerland, Germany, Australia etc.).

The emergence, development and establishment of the Egyptian community has always been accompanied by presentation of the appropriate folklore, accompanied by scientific explanation. The first book (Risteski, 1991) published by the Association of the Egyptians was dedicated to their myths and legends. The second book (Zemon, 1996) was a scientific one, dedicated to key issues of their community - their ethno-genesis, history of the Egyptian movement, ethnographic descriptions... Again we have a repetition of the familiar Balkan patterns of putting their own folklore first and emphasizing the extremely important place of their ancient history.

Parallel with this phenomenon there are attempts to develop their own media. In 1995 the association of the Yugoslavian Egyptians for Kosovo and Metohia began to publish the magazine "Voice of the Yugoslavian Egyptians" and in 1998 the association of the Egyptians in Macedonia began to publish the magazine "Voice of the Egyptians in Macedonia".

Many documents and publications of the Egyptians established the symbols of the new community, which were most often related to ancient Egypt (and sometimes also the profession of blacksmith as their traditional profession) - these are most often pyramids, Nefertiti's head, an anvil and two hammers ...

Together with local activities, the Egyptians also began to aspire to the international arena. In 1992 Rubin Zemon, as a representative of the Egyptians, took part in a conference organised by OSCE in Helsinki, and in 1993 an Egyptian representative attended the Human rights conference in Vienna.

Contacts with the Egyptian embassies in the Balkan countries are constantly being sought. In 1990 the chairman of the Egyptian union Nazmi Arifi was invited to a reception in the Egyptian embassy in Belgrade to celebrate the Egyptian national holiday (July 23). In 1991 the Egyptian ambassador to Yugoslavia Hussein Hassouna visited Ohrid and met with representatives of the Egyptians. The positions of the Egyptian ambassadors in the Balkan countries are not coordinated, for example, the Egyptian embassy in Albania is not interested at all and refuses meetings with representatives of the local Egyptians.

These are all stages in the development of a community in the process of formation. All materials (books, media releases, documentaries) prepared by the Egyptian organisation, and especially the official decisions of their congresses and meetings show the clear awareness of the Egyptians that they are living in a process of formation and establishment as a community, which to a great extent is a repetition of the familiar Balkan patterns. This becomes very clear in the Plan-Programme of the Union of Balkan Egyptians, read at the Ohrid congress (Studii Romani, 1998):

"...to create a cultural and information centre with offices, to gather data about the places where Egyptians live, to collect the people's cultural heritage and preserve it there. This is what we have to do, the thing which other nations did in the 19th c, we are late, we have to hurry. To establish an institute for the study of Balkan Egyptians, to organise international cultural and sports events, seminars, symposia, folklore festivals.... Immediately to begin the process of collecting information about our people, to distribute questionnaires, surveys, to collect them in the institute or in the centre...."

The events in Kosovo which followed the First congresses of the Balkan Egyptians gave a different impetus to the development of the Egyptian community. During the Peace talks in Rambouillet they entered the international arena for the first time. Cherim Abazi as a Representative of the "ethnic community of Egyptians" was part of the Serbian delegation. The international aggression against Yugoslavia and the ethnic cleansing of the non-Albanian population in Kosovo, which followed, led to a lesser Egyptian presence in Kosovo. At present many Egyptians are fugitives in Serbia and others are scattered all over the world.

Different figures provide information about the Kosovo population migrations in the period. According to some figures in September of 1998 there were 41 000 Egyptians in Kosovo, 21 000 left Kosovo after June 10, 1999 and 20 000 remained after September 2000. (Andjelkovic & All, 2000:261) Though we cannot be certain about the reliability of this information, it can still be used to give us a certain idea of the situation.

In this new for the Egyptians situation their efforts are directed towards various goals. The most urgent task in Kosovo is the need to organise all remaining Egyptians. The Albanian Egyptian Association of Kosovo was founded headed by Ibish Bajrami. In Macedonia and Serbia humanitarian aid for the fugitives was organised. Many efforts were made in Macedonia to solve the conflicts in the refugee camps between Roma and Egyptians. The Egyptian emigrants and refugees in Western Europe are were fighting to remain in these countries and not to be returned to Kosovo. Actions were taken against

the silence of the world community and the international institutions regarding the existence of the Egyptians. In Germany, for example, demonstrations were organised for the recognition of the ethnic uniqueness of the Egyptians. These demonstrations usually remained unnoticed by world media.

The presence of international forces and organisations in Kosovo and their attempt to ensure the representation of all minorities in the Kosovo government (Kosovo Transitional Council), besides the Egyptian issue, had another surprising outcome. A new ethnic community emerged, the so called Ashkali, who demanded their own identity and representation in the governing bodies. Over a relatively short period of time the Ashkali established their own organisations, such as a political party (Democratic Party of Albanian Ashkali in Kosovo with President Sabit Rahmani), as well as the non-governmental organisation "Democratic Hope", headed by Agim Hyseni.

The Ashkali quickly created their own explanation of their ethno-genesis and history. According to their explanation, they claimed to have come originally from Iran and arrived in the Balkans in the 4th century. Therefore, they were the second oldest people here. When they came, only the Illyrians were here and they (Ashkali) adopted the language of the Illyrians and the Illyrians adopted the religion of the Ashkali, i.e. Islam (sic! – in 4th c.). Another version about their origin also emerged, which had its arguments in the Bible. According to it the Ashkali originated in the town Askalon in Palestine, i.e. generally speaking, just like any other Balkan nation the Ashkali derived their origin from most ancient times and relate it to the world civilisations and religions.

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In the present time of complex ethnic configuration on the Balkans, of shifting of positions and relations between the different nations, the very existence of Egyptians and Ashkali as separate communities adds to the tension in the region. The relations between the three communities – Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians - which the surrounding population perceives as one, are more tense.

The three communities blame each other for forced assimilation and deprivation of identity. The Roma believe that all three communities are Roma communities, which due to external pressure, discrimination, rejection and alien interests, choose to regard themselves as non-Roma. The Egyptians blame the Roma for their desire to be the stronger and more influential ethnic community at their expense (especially strong are the accusations directed towards Roma NGOs, which are looking for more targets to care for, such as the refugees in Macedonia where the Egyptians are pressured to identify themselves as Roma). According to the Egyptians, the Ashkali are pure Egyptians, who under Albanian pressure or voluntarily, because of some specific interests, present themselves as another community. According to the Ashkali the Egyptians are trying to assimilate them...

Finally, all three communities blame the external powers and each one of them thinks that they prefer the other two. For example, the Egyptians in Germany think that the Ashkali association in Germany was founded by Kosovars as a form of an Albanian political play, assisted by Western Europe in order to destroy the Egyptian movement. They think that if the world finds out that about 350-400 thousand Egyptians live in Albania, then it will not be a united and one-nation country. On the other hand, the Roma

blame the international powers for supporting the strays (Egyptians and Ashkali), especially in Kosovo. This is clearly seen in a statement published in RomNews Network Newsletter (25 Nov 1999):

"...according to the report from UNHCR, the Roma children participate in education, but also according to the UNHCR the majority of them are Ashkalis or Egyptians, and only a minor number of them are Rom. For such claims, the Roma from Kosovo, now dispersed, protest, and say that: All the Roms in Kosovo are Rom and they can be nothing but Rom, because they were Roms for centuries."

The current processes on the Balkans are complicated, diversified and multi-directional. We have to emphasize the place these processes have in the framework of an ever-growing Roma nationalism, with a strong international lobby on many levels, which tries to unite all Gypsies under the Roma flag and to convince or even to press all communities with preferred ethnic identity to return to their "Romani roots".

We also have to have in mind the fact that they are influenced by a number of "external" factors coming from the macrosociety. The recent example of one such influence is the reversion of the Egyptians from Kosovo to the Roma in Switzerland in connection with the granted delay for Roma to be returned back to Kosovo. Of course the question how steady this reversion will be is still open.

The processes of identity change are influenced also by the scientific work of specialists whose writings, and the ideas and concepts they express, often penetrate quickly into the Gypsy environment. Again, all this brings to the forefront several issues such as the issue of the moral responsibility of scientists towards the target of their study, the issue of human rights and more precisely of the right of self determination, etc.

The question whether the Egyptians will succeed in creating their own nation and how many other new nations will be born on the Balkans remains open.

*\* This work was supported by the Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Foundation, grant No. 1134/2000.*

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## NOVI ETNIČKI IDENTITETI NA BALKANU: SLUČAJ EGIPĆANA

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*Posle krize na Kosovu, svet je otkrio postojanje nove, do tada nepoznate, zajednice. Ta se zajednica nazivala Balkanski Egipćani. Internacionalne institucije (kao što su KFOR, UNHCR, OEBS i druge), nevladine i organizacije za ljudska prava i mas medija bili su u konfuziji povodom novog fenomena: nisu znali da reaguju na to.*

Ključne reči: *Romi, Balkanski Egipćani, Aškali*