

## **Religious Experience, Institutionalized Religions, and the Vernacular Politics of Identity.**

**Day 3 – Stream 1: 9.00-10.30; 11.00-11.45 (Gellner Room)**

**Rapporteurs:** Prof. Vlad Naumescu

**Participants and discussants:** Sorin Gog (Prof. David Berliner), Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (Prof. David Berliner), Maja Veselic (Prof. Jean-Louis Fabiani)

In this panel, the manifold and often hidden links that exist between religion, state, and civil societies in (post)communist countries will come to the forefront. How do religious experiences and the institutional (i.e. church) affiliations that often result out of those, influence people's understandings of the 'self', as well as further shape the state's perceptions and definitions of religion?

Papers included in this panel will look at how the intensification of the Pentecostal religious movement after the fall of communism has led to the emergence of new self-understandings of Gypsiness in Romania, where specific social mechanisms are being created that allow for the institutionalization of new identity models among Gypsies. Furthermore, another paper will touch upon the question of how the religious failure of “incomplete” Roma mystics is reflected in their non-active positions as citizens in the political environment of today's Macedonia. Finally, the growing networks of local ethno-religious charities among the Hui (Chinese Muslims) will be examined with a focus on how those dynamically interact with formal (i.e. state) institutions, thereby challenging and redefining what is considered proper religion, or in this particular case, legitimate and hence state-sanctioned Islam in the People's Republic of China.

Ethnographic data collected by the authors of this panel highlights how religious experiences – most often perceived as highly private dimensions of a person's self – are actually linked to public selves and thus to state institutions, which results in those experiences being played out in the vernacular politics of identity.

### **Sorin Gog: The New Heavenly Citizenship: Gypsiness and the Pentecostal Politics of Identity.**

My research project focuses on the spreading of the Pentecostal movement among one of the most socially marginalized ethnic minorities in Romania, namely the Gypsy / Roma. I am trying to analyze how the conversion to a new religion restructures their conception of self, life-styles, world-views and ways of living. By doing so I argue that the massive intensification of the Pentecostal movement that took place after the fall of communism has led to the emergence of a new self-understanding of Gypsiness (y Blasco 2000, 2000b).

The conversion of Gypsies to Pentecostalism needs to be understood within two different genealogies in Romanian society: 1) the communist period that led to a multi-ethnic unified religious community that was together keeping their faith; and 2) the post-socialist period that has seen to the emergence of separate ethnic Gypsy Pentecostal churches. This research project focuses on the recent religious mobility of Gypsies towards Pentecostalism and the impact this has had on their ethnic identity.

The religious conversion of Gypsies cannot be accounted for in facile economical terms and soul-for-food theories, as many have attempted to conceptualize it before. The many Gypsy churches that appeared after the fall of Communism managed on a micro-level to institutionalize a new self-understanding of Gypsiness that delimited the newly emerged religious community from both the traditional Gypsy out-casts and from their Romanian Pentecostal brothers.

In this research project I would like to explore the issue of how religious conversion changes the social and cultural identity of the Gypsy community and what the features are of the Pentecostal

model of Gypsiness that emerges from this. The Gypsy Pentecostals develop a strong ecstatic religiosity (in which prophecies, visions, charismatic singing, and healing prayers play a very important role) which is framed according to the ethos of the community and its social location. The Gypsy Pentecostal churches are strongly autonomous and are not linked organizationally to the main Romanian Pentecostal Church which enables them to institutionalize a social and ethnic identity based on Pentecostal elements without being incorporated by other Romanian Pentecostals. This happens because the Gypsies feel themselves discriminated against both by Romanian Orthodox groups and by Romanian Pentecostals.

As many other researchers have pointed out before, the Rroma / Gypsy communities are strongly fragmented along kinship lines (Gay y Blasco 1999) and lack an ethnic-nationalist narrative which would allow them to articulate an overarching "imagined community"(Anderson 2006). The lack of political mobilization and marginalization dividing them from the ethnic majority coupled with their economic destitution leads to a widespread disempowerment of Rroma / Gypsy in Romania, which is particularly pronounced in rural areas where opportunity structures are limited and Rroma / Gypsy locals are mostly excluded from partaking.

The analysis of religious conversion to Pentecostalism can help us understand how ethnic and social exclusion can be successfully dealt with by giving a marginalized community the means to generate its own structures of identity. Pentecostalism induces not only social inclusion but also the ethnic management of identity. Pentecostalism enables the social and cultural means for the creation of micro-communities that are highly capable of imagining ethnic narratives that can mobilize different social groups. How are ethnic identities structured by new religious movements? What do they tell us about the post-socialist configuration of ethnic identities and the struggles to come up with a legal framework that protects ethnic and religious minorities?

### **Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic: Incomplete Mystics: Religious Failure among Roma Muslims in Urban Macedonia**

I will look at the failure of Muslim mystics in Skopje to commit to religious practice and to accomplish religious prowess in performing and experiencing mystical Islam under their existential conditions.

I will focus on the unfolding ritual event, including the expectations, the performance and the consequences of the zikir, an ecstatic ritual, that did not deliver anticipated mystical absorption and experiences and left everybody dissatisfied. Despite people's significant familiarity with the theological propositions of Islamic mysticism, this ethnographic material shows that these aspirants to mysticism did not master the shift from learning religious ideas to adroit religious performances and refashioning of their subjectivities and ways of being in line with mystical prescriptions. Most of people's plans and endeavours to manage religious observance, to hone their performative flair, to plagiarize religious experiences and to simulate convincing rituals ultimately floundered. Some steps toward repair were undertaken, for example convening a disciplinary meeting, disciplinski sostanok, in the aftermath of the failed ritual, and speculating about discovering or devising a method to affect a religious transformation, but these measures fell flat as well. As a result, the incomplete, fasik, mystics succumbed to frustration and religious dejection, accentuated by intersubjective dislikes and a sense of futility, and abandoned several of their projects including reading Arabic and story-telling.

The analysis of the concrete situations of religious failure to perform and to experience religions marks a departure from cognitive and phenomenological studies of religious learning and performance that tend to overstress successful engagements with projects of religiosity. I will go against the grain of the bulk of ethnographies of religions, and, keeping in mind the recent discussions of learning belief, skepticism and unbelief, religious reflexivity, and seriousness of religious play, I hope to recast the understandings of efforts that go into being moved by religious

ideas to devotional performances and encountering craved for religious experiences. I will touch upon the questions of whether and how religious failure of incomplete Roma mystics is being refracted in their non-active positions as citizens in the political ambiance of today's Macedonia.

### **Maja Veselic: Good citizens and good Muslims: Chinese Muslim Activism in Northwest China**

In my paper I examine how the growing networks of local ethno-religious charities among the Hui in N.W.China - i.e. Chinese Muslims, who are recognized as one of the 55 official minority ethnic groups - dynamically interact with formal (state) institutions, thereby challenging and redefining what is considered proper religion (/zhengjiao/) or more particularly legitimate, and hence legally allowed, Islam in the PRC.

Organized as formally registered /minjian/ (popular) organizations - in English best yet inadequately rendered as NGOs - or as informal, but often close-knit networks of Hui businessmen, intellectuals and religious leaders, these associations engage in a variety of activities ranging from taking over where the state failed to meet people's needs (as in financing studies at all levels of education or offering disaster relief), to other communally important tasks such as publishing religious books and magazines or maintaining a matchmaking service. Their financial support comes from local and nation-wide donations as well as from Muslim individuals and organizations from abroad.

Operating between political control and moral proselytism, their relationship to the state entails multiple processes: competition, adaptation and cooperation as well as, occasionally, conflict. On the one hand, Hui ethnic and religious elites largely subscribe to state's hegemonic discourses on the nation, science and development, for example by framing their activities within the elusive notion of cultivating /suzhi/ (intellectual, moral and physical quality of a person or a group) or by references to the government's campaign of "Great Development of the West (/Xibu da kaifa/)". Through their welfare work they refute still widely held official and popular opinion that religion is a feudal superstition and thus an obstacle to modernization. On the contrary, they prove it is an important transformative force in the economically deprived regions of inland China. However, Hui definitions of moral personhood in the Northwest usually also include compliance with Islamic teachings and practices that place the point of authority and loyalty beyond the Chinese state. This results in the close monitoring of Muslim /minjian/ organizations by various state organs. Through few selected cases this paper will attempt to reveal some of the complex and ambiguous interactions between the state and Muslims in contemporary China.

(The paper is based on 14 months of doctoral fieldwork that I have conducted in southern and eastern Gansu and eastern Qinghai between September 2005 and March 2007. I intend to revisit the research sites this spring.)