ROMANIAN ACADEMY
SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED STUDIES OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMY
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY AND LEGAL SCIENCES
Research Institute for Quality of Life

DOCTORAL THESIS*:*

SOCIAL MEMORY OF GYPSIES SLAVERY IN THE ROMANIAN SPACE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY OF ROMA

DOCTORAL ADVISOR:
CS. I Dr. Sorin Cace

PhD STUDENT:
Adrian-Nicolae Furtună

Summary of the PhD thesis

This doctoral thesis aims to investigate the memory of Roma slavery in the Romanian space, analyzing how it was transmitted, reinterpreted or erased in local, regional and national contexts and how this memory influences Roma cultural identity and the construction of modern Roma identity. The starting point of the research is the observation that, although Roma slavery represented a fundamental institution of the societies of Wallachia and Moldavia, for a period of almost five centuries, this historical episode is absent or marginal in local collective memories and in the national public memory. If the abolition of slavery between 1843–1856 coincided with the first attempts of the elites to formulate a project of a Romanian nation, then precisely this national construction produced an institutionalized oblivion: Roma slavery became incompatible with the self-image of a nation that wanted European recognition and modern legitimacy.

The research starts from the hypothesis that the memory of slavery has not disappeared, but has fragmented, being transmitted in different ways: "alive" in local communities, through oral traditions, toponyms, churches specially built for enslaved Roma, family stories and transmitted memories, but "dead" or neutralized at the level of national memory, where the heritage and official historical discourse have privileged princely and boyar figures, artistic values and religious symbols. This tension between living memory and dead memory, between community and national, between peripheral and central, constitutes the core of the investigation.

From a theoretical point of view, the thesis is based on Maurice Halbwachs' contributions on collective memory, on Jan Assmann's distinctions between communicative memory and cultural memory, as well as on the idea of "cultural trauma" formulated by Jeffrey C. Alexander. Halbwachs allows us to understand the memory of slavery as a social phenomenon dependent on the "social frames of memory" that maintain it: the family, the community, religious institutions, the state. Assmann explains how, through cultural selections and institutionalizations, Romanian society integrated and transformed the memory of slavery. Alexander provides the conceptual framework to understand why Roma slavery has not become a national cultural trauma: because there are no publicly legitimized memory bearers who could transform it into a common identity landmark.

The methodology is interdisciplinary, combining archival analysis (charters, sales records, complaints, liberation charters, laws), field research (interviews with elderly people from Roma and mixed communities, participatory observation, discussions with museographers and clergy), as well as comparative analysis of cultural productions (folklore, literature, contemporary Roma theater and film). The investigation was carried out over a period of over seven years, in multiple significant communities: Tismana, Horezu, Bistrița, Cozia, Dezrobiți, Câmpulung, Govora, Mogoșoaia, Țuțești, Țigănești, BoldeștiScăieni, Sadova. In these places I identified "places of memory" –churches special built for enslaved Roma, the toponyms "Țigănia", oral traditions – but also "places of oblivion" – communities near the former boyar manors, where the memory of slavery is "dead".

The research results confirm the working hypothesis: the memory of slavery is strongly fragmented and racialized. These memories are marked by shame and often by reluctance, which makes their transmission difficult. Another result is the observation of the mechanisms through which the memory of slavery was racialized. Negative stereotypes about Roma – greed, inability to organize, laziness – were culturally fixed through folklore, literature ("the Gypsies who ate their church", Budai-Deleanu'sȚiganiada, popular satires) and the narrative of national history, and replaced the real history of slavery with a ridiculed story. In this way, the memory of slavery became part of a collective imaginary that consolidated the marginalization of Roma. Moreover, classical historiography contributed to the de-racialization of slavery by extending the phenomenon to other categories (dependent Romanians, Tatars), despite the reality that Roma were the ones who constituted the body of slavery. This approach diminished the specificity of Roma slavery.

The thesis also highlights the fact that slavery functioned as a "connective structure" of Romanian society, in the sense of Jan Assmann. The action of sale-purchase of slaves were repeated for centuries according to a fixed canon, becoming a social and legal ritual that ensured the cohesion of the social order. The introduction of anathema in these acts shows the connection between religious norms and the legitimacy of slavery. At the same time, in the 19th century, the abolition of slavery led to the creation of a "new Romanian", in which former slaves were officially transformed into peasants, but the memory of slavery was excluded in order to avoid the "gypsyization" of the new national identity.

An essential aspect that deserves to be developed is the triad of slave owners – the ruler/state, the boyars and the monasteries. This division was not only administrative, but represented a distribution of power in pre-modern Romanian society. The Roma appears simultaneously in these three registers: as a resource of the state (used for works of general

interest), as private property transmitted hereditary by the boyars, and as an economic resource of the monasteries, justified religiously. This triad shows that slavery was an organic institution, accepted and legitimized in all social strata. From the perspective of cultural memory, the presence of slaves in the heritage of the monasteries creates a contradiction that is felt to this day: the buildings constructed by slave labour are celebrated as symbols of faith and the Brancovan artistic style, but the memory of those who were exploited in the construction of these heritage sites is almost completely absent from the public discourse.

This situation perfectly reflects Assmann's distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory. At the community level, the memory of slavery has survived in communicative forms: stories passed down by elders, toponyms, accounts of ancestors who were slaves. But at the institutional level, heritage and historiography have transformed slavery into a "dead" memory: monasteries are restored, mansions or palaces are transformed into museums, but without integrating the story of the slaves. The result is a profound dissonance: the living memory of slavery is found in Roma communities, but it is not validated by cultural institutions, which makes it vulnerable, fragmented and marked by shame.

The chapter dedicated to Ștefan Răzvan analyzes the figure of the ruler of Moldavia (April–August 1595), considered by some sources to be the first ruler of Roma origin to ascend the throne of a European country. The research follows both his biographical trajectory and the way in which his image was retained, reinterpreted and, to a large extent, marginalized in the Romanian historical memory. His political ascension was made possible by his connections with Ștefan Băthory, the prince of Transylvania, and by the regional context of the anti-Ottoman wars, an ally of Michael the Brave. His reign, very short, took place at a time of maximum tension and ended with the defeat at Areni and his execution in a completely different way from the way in which other “usurpers” had been executed before him. From the perspective of cultural memory, Ștefan Răzvan is an example of how national memory selectively managed the past: although he was a legitimate, officially recognized ruler, his memory was blurred, and his Roma origin was either silenced or transformed into a stigma: "the gypsy who became emperor."

The collective memory did not retain the experience of Ștefan Răzvan's reign because it did not serve social cohesion: a lord of Roma origin contradicted the symbolic order of power, based on the idea of hereditary nobility and boyar legitimacy. Thus, the social frameworks of memory – chroniclers, intellectual and political elites – preferred to reduce or erase his memory. The analysis also shows how the image of Ștefan Răzvan was recovered

late, in contemporary Roma public memory, as a symbol of resistance and dignity. In this context, his figure functions as a "place of memory", which allows the Roma community to claim an active historical presence and to counter stereotypes about their structural inferiority.

The chapter highlights a double dynamic: its oblivion from national memory through deliberate transformations of its image and its recent recovery as a symbol of Roma identity. This double dynamic confirms the central hypothesis of the thesis: the memory of slavery and of Roma in general is selectively managed, being excluded from the dominant narrative, but surviving in alternative forms of memory, which today become tools of identity reconstruction.

In the end, a dual conclusion emerges: on one hand, the memory of Roma slavery is fundamental to the modern identity project of the Roma, while on the other hand, the exclusion of slavery from the national memory reveals the limits of Romanian identity construction. The memory of slavery was not preserved primarily through the descendants of the enslaved, but rather through the institutions or individuals who owned them. This explains why today public memory reproduces the perspective of the masters, not of the enslaved. At the local level, in communities such as Dezrobiți, Bistrița, or Tismana, the memory of slavery still exists: people recount ancestors who were enslaved, the lands granted during "Cuza," and slavery itself as an institution that made them be seen and to see themselves as people of the place. This living memory, however, is fragile, often transmitted with shame, and the younger generations no longer receive it. At the national level, the memory of slavery is dead: Brâncovenesc monasteries or princely palaces are presented as symbols of Romanian art, yet without any reference to the slaves who worked for them. UNESCO recognizes Hurezi as a world heritage site, but without incorporating the memory of slavery into this heritage.

The memory of Roma slavery is an uncomfortable, racialized, and marginalized memory that has not been integrated into the national cultural heritage. It exists, but at the margins: in oral stories, within Roma communities, in place names, in churches, and in the testimonies of contemporary Roma artists who seek to recover it (Alina Șerban, Mihaela Drăgan). In the absence of institutional efforts to recover and preserve this memory, the memory of slavery cannot become a shared cultural trauma, remaining a "living" memory only in certain places and a "dead" memory in official discourse. Furthermore, the thesis shows that confronting this past is not merely a matter of symbolic reparation, but a condition

for the maturation of national identity, which must include traumatic or shameful experiences in order to build an authentic cultural continuity.

The chapter "The Avatars of Ioana Rudăreasa: From the Struggle for Freedom to the Social Construction of Heroism" examines the historical and symbolic transformation of Ioana Rudăreasa from an enslaved Roma woman who fought for her freedom into a contemporary emblem of Roma emancipation, resistance, and identity construction. Ioana Rudăreasa initiated legal proceedings against the Brăiloiu family in 1843, shortly after the first abolition law concerning state-owned Roma slaves in Wallachia, and obtained her freedom in 1853 after a decade-long judicial struggle. Her case is particularly significant because it unfolded during the broader process of Roma emancipation in the Romanian Principalities and illustrates the active resistance of enslaved Roma against the institution of slavery.

The chapter argues that Ioana Rudăreasa's image has gradually evolved from a historical figure into a socially constructed heroine situated between memory, representation, and identity politics. Her story functions both as a recovery of suppressed Roma historical agency and as a symbolic challenge to dominant national narratives that marginalized the experience of Roma slavery. Through the lens of social memory and phenomenology, the author interprets Ioana Rudăreasa as a "consciousness of slavery," embodying the refusal of Roma people to accept enslavement and social exclusion.

The chapter further explores how her memory has been reconstructed in recent years through academic research, documentaries, public discourse, and educational initiatives. The circulation of archival images incorrectly identified as representations of Ioana Rudăreasa demonstrates the broader social need to materialize and visualize her figure in collective memory. This process reveals how contemporary society projects symbolic meanings onto historical figures in order to create accessible narratives about freedom, dignity, and perseverance.

A central argument of the chapter is that Ioana Rudăreasa has become a foundational figure in the modern political and cultural construction of Roma identity in Romania. Her case has been integrated into educational proposals concerning the history of Roma slavery and deportation and has been embraced by both Roma and non-Roma feminist movements, albeit with different symbolic functions. For Roma feminists, Ioana represents not only resistance and emancipation, but also the recovery of the erased historical presence of Roma women.

The chapter also situates Ioana Rudăreasa within a broader global framework of slavery studies, emphasizing parallels between the struggles of enslaved Roma and those of other enslaved populations, particularly African Americans. Her legal battle demonstrates that Roma slaves were not passive victims, but historical actors capable of resistance and agency. By recovering her story, the thesis contributes to restoring the voices of enslaved Roma within the historiography of abolition and emancipation.

Ultimately, the chapter concludes that the figure of Ioana Rudăreasa represents more than an individual biography; she has become a "site of memory" through which contemporary Roma identity, collective memory, and historical justice are negotiated. Her transformation into a heroic figure illustrates the ongoing process through which marginalized histories are reclaimed and integrated into both Roma cultural identity and broader discussions about historical trauma, recognition, and reconciliation.

The conclusion of the thesis is that the memory of Roma slavery is fragmented and tense. It is alive in local communities, but dead at the national level; racialized in folklore and literature, yet artificially de-racialized in historiography; excluded from heritage, yet reactivated by contemporary Roma art. This dual existence of memory—both alive and dead, present and absent—reveals not only how Romanian society relates to the past, but also the limits of national identity. A national identity that conceals slavery cannot be complete; a memory that does not integrate traumas cannot be mature. In this sense, the thesis makes an essential contribution: it shows that Roma slavery is not only a historical issue but also a contemporary one, connected to racism, marginalization, and lack of recognition. Recovering this memory does not mean assigning blame, but fostering maturity; it does not only involve repairing a community trauma, but also completing the national identity with a part of history that we have chosen to forget.

Overall, the thesis demonstrates that the memory of Roma slavery is essential for understanding both Roma identity and Romanian cultural history. Its exclusion from the national narrative is not accidental, but part of a systematic process of selecting the past, one that privileged glory while concealing shame. Reopening this memory—through historical research, art, education, and heritage—is a necessary step to transform a "dead" memory into a "living" one, making it an integral part of contemporary Romanian culture.