

# Mobilising “culture” and “religion”: Ritual practices and social relations among two minority groups in rural Transylvania\*

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**Abstract:** *This article is based on an ethnographic study of a Transylvanian village inhabited by Hungarians and Roma. I analyse the processes of ritual revitalisation which is characteristic of the postsocialist period. My main argument is that religion and ritual provide important resources for individuals and communities seeking to assert themselves publicly in postsocialist Romania. The need for public affirmation among minorities is acute, and the forms of ritual they adopt differs: some groups are more receptive to the revival of communal rituals and ‘traditions’, while for others, revitalisation is focused on the individual. The two denominations considered in this study are Calvinism and Pentecostalism. Calvinism relies on the affirmation of cultural values to mobilise the faithful while Pentecostalism advocates a new form of moral personhood which is particularly attractive to a segment of the local Roma.*

**Keywords:** rural Transylvania, minorities, postsocialist public sphere, ritual revitalisation, conversion, Pentecostalism

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Transilvania rurală, minorităţi, spaţiu public postsocialist, revitalizarea ritualurilor, conversie religioasă, penticostalism

## Introduction

In this article I address some aspects of the ritual, cultural and religious transformation of postsocialist Romania. Although my research has been carried out among ethnic and religious minority groups (Hungarians/Roma respectively Calvinist/Pentecostal) my analysis aims to uncover larger processes which can also be identified among other segments of Romanian society. My main argument is that religion and ritual provide important resources for individuals and communities seeking to assert themselves publicly in postsocialist Romania. The need for public affirmation among minorities is acute, and the forms of ritual they may adopt differ:

some groups are more receptive to the revival of communal rituals and ‘traditions’, while for others, revitalisation is focused on the individual. I divided the article into four subsections: in this introduction I present a short literature overview. In the next two sections I analyse two rituals taken from my ethnographic work in a Transylvania village near Cluj, which I will refer to here as Gánás. Lastly, I will summarise my findings regarding ritual revitalisation in the concluding section.

The anthropological literature on religious and cultural revitalisation is abundant. Here I will discuss a cross section of this literature which I consider most relevant for my topic. First I consider two approaches which can be seen as opposites, but also as

complementary to each other. The anthropologist Peter Worsley (Worsley, 1957) can be credited for an approach which proved to be influential in interpreting religious and cultural revival. Worsley elaborated a hypothesis first published by Tibor Bodrogi (Bodrogi, 1951) which links the religious revival-movements of Melanesia to the negative consequences of the colonial expansion and the decline of the economic and social conditions of the aborigines in this part of the World. According to Worsley's hypothesis, religious movements are a symbolic response to declining conditions. Aborigines, the theory contends, engage in religious activities in order to make sense of the social crisis caused by colonialism. This hypothesis, therefore, is a prototype of a whole family of explanations (also labelled as the *deprivation hypotheses*) which interpret rising religious activities through the frame of economic and social decline, attributing a *defensive character* to religious revivals.

If one takes a leap forward in time and a long step in space, a second hypothesis can be extracted from the work of the Dutch anthropologist, Jeremy Boissevain. Boissevain edited a volume about the ritual revitalisation in Europe (Boissevain, 1992b). The volume consists of case studies coming from different European societies showing that, during the 1980s, public rituals connected to religious and cultural activities intensified across the European continent. Boissevain advances the explanation in his introduction to the volume that these changes should be interpreted in connection to post-World War II social transformations. The economic reconstruction that followed the War brought about high social costs. The forced centralisation and industrialisation which characterised the post-war period required an intensive and demanding workload from the population, it resulted in high rates of migration, and it caused the dissolution of local communities. These demands lost their intensity by the 1970s. During the 1980s, churches, cultural associations and local authorities were more willing to subsidise public festivals and cel-

ebrations that generated more social solidarity and the reconstruction of local identities. Boissevain concludes that ritual revitalisation, which resulted from the re-emergence of local identities, contribute towards turning Europe into a more relaxed and cheerful place (Boissevain, 1992a, 15-16). One can interpret the model proposed by Boissevain as a hypothesis which offers an explanation for the European ritual revitalisations as *compensation mechanism* for the earlier efforts on the eve of a more relaxed and economically prosperous period.

Apparently, there is a theoretical opposition between the models offered by Worsley and Boissevain, but this tension can be used in a constructive manner if one examines the Eastern side of the European continent after 1989. Although Boissevain included one study from Poland in his collection, most of the volume's ethnographic material comes from Southern Europe : from Catholic (Spain and Malta), and Orthodox (Greece) societies with the addition of a case-study from England. Rituals and religious revitalisation in Eastern Europe goes largely unexplored. This is the terrain scrutinised by the studies collected in a volume under the title *The post-socialist religious question* (Hann and the\_Civil\_Religion\_Group, 2006) which address the intricate relationship between the secular power of the State, civil society and churches after the fall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia. The studies gathered in this volume depict a colourful image of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but this picture is far from being as cheerful as one could expect from the Southern European case-studies. Still, at the most general level, one can conclude that religion and ritual revitalisations can be interpreted as devices which *mobilise* societies. Furthermore, religion and ritual can be *resources* even in contexts where the postsocialist State fails to deliver social care and solidarity ; religious organisations can create alternative social structures.

In addition to these structural transformations, the value-orientation of members of religious organisations need to be investigated and the shifts in these orientations considered. But how are the life-style and value orientation of members of a denomination influenced by a religious movement? In order to investigate this question, I propose to consider a typology of religious movements according to their attitudes and practices directed at the cultural values they encounter. Following the works of David Lehman, I argue that two major types of religious expansion can be distinguished into two diverging modes of religious movements (see Lehman, 1998). The distinction is based on the observation of the ways a religious system of ideas and practices relate to and/or intend to change the 'culture', by which I mean the ideas and everyday practices which define the life-style of a group. This conceptual division is dependent on a theoretical distinction between 'culture' and 'religion'. This distinction is not always in place<sup>1</sup>. However, once it is made the consequences are not insignificant because the differences in perceiving the relationships between 'culture' and 'religion' can determine how a religion or a religious movement 'travels'; how it will cross boundaries of different groups; and how it will be incorporated into the lifestyle of new communities. Two poles can be separated among those religious movements which propose a *culturally sensitive* approach on the one hand and those which prefer to stay *culturally neutral* or advocate a 'culturally blind' approach on the other hand.

Both of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages for the success of the spread and accommodation of the religious movement in new contexts. The culturally sensitive approach develops a distinct theory of 'cultural systems' and attributes cultural value to the ideas and practices which are expressed and enacted by a particular group. This kind of approach accepts or even values the 'culture' of a society and envisions the accommodation of the new religious ideas

and values within these older ideas and practices. Therefore, a culturally sensitive approach will tolerate religious syncretism, and it will encourage the expression of its religious ideas in varied forms without enforcing dogmatism. It has a long-term perspective on religious change and often employs a step-by-step approach. One particular form of a culturally sensitive religious movement can be encountered in the idea of *inculturation* as defined by Catholic theologians (see Tomka, 2001).

A significant advantage of the culturally sensitive approach is that it accounts for cultural differences, it facilitates the often complicated process of cultural translation of religious principles and it allows for intercultural communication. But these virtues can also become its main drawbacks: the intellectualism of the culturally sensitive approach may backfire and attempts at cultural translation and intercultural communication may fail. If these ideas are put in practice in the frame of such hierarchical structures as the Catholic Church they may also meet resistance and criticism within the church organisation. Moreover the most serious problem of this approach is that it is dependent on the concept of 'culture', or more exactly, on how the idea of 'culture' is defined and put into practice. How can a religious form expand into other socio-cultural contexts if it is intimately connected to a set of ideas and practices which are bound to a group? How can it incorporate new subgroups into these culturally specific forms? These questions need to be addressed through everyday situations. Furthermore, culturally sensitive approaches need to stay 'open' in order to incorporate new subcultures, and if it embarks on 'travel,' they need the expertise of cultural specialists of the receiving society.

Compared to the culturally sensitive approach, culturally neutral forms 'travel' much faster. Because the concept of 'culture' as a theoretically constituted whole has little practical significance for those movements they cross, group boundaries easily reproduce their

social organisations based on an internal logic that responds to different circumstances. In opposition to the intellectualism of the culturally sensitive approach they encourage more emotional and more experience-based communities, which are also characterised of a higher degree of dogmatism, internal social control and more vigilant boundary-policing. They do not aim primarily at reproducing cultural values, but proclaim and demand moral renewal ('rebirth'). In order to achieve renewal, they even criticise some aspects of the receiving 'culture' or declare it 'sinful'.

Although these two forms are markedly different, they need not be seen in a sharp dichotomy. One or the other can be found within a single religion and they can characterise different periods of one and the same religious organisation or church. The most typical scenario is cyclical: a movement 'travels' in a rather culturally neutral form, and after being received and accommodated by a group or social strata, it develops a more culturally sensitive approach in order to incorporate further subgroups or other social strata. The history of Christianity in Romania in general, and in Transylvania specifically, can be interpreted through this scenario. Christianity arrived in the Carpathian Basin in a more culturally neutral form, but during the centuries of religious incorporation and differentiation, the different Christian denominations adopted ever more culturally sensitive approaches. Therefore most of the denominations are seen as ethically marked in Transylvania today. For example, Orthodox Christianity and Greek Catholicism is connected to the Romanian language and ethnicity, Calvinism and Unitarianism is seen as ethnically Hungarian, Lutheranism is connected to German ethnicity because it used to be a form of Christianity embraced by the Transylvanian Saxons. Roman Catholicism, by contrast, is considered to be more trans-ethnic in its approach (Romanians, Hungarians, Germans and other groups are incorporated), but in most situations, Roman Catholicism is still seen as

connected to Hungarian ethnicity. The most culturally neutral forms of Christianity are the neo-protestant denominations in Romania today.

In the following two subsections I will turn to analyse two rituals in a Transylvanian village (the confirmation ceremony of the Calvinists and a conversion narrative among the Pentecostals) using concepts first coined by an American cultural anthropologist Roy Rappaport. Rappaport summarised his definition of the ritual as 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers' (Rappaport, 1999, 24). He elaborates by distinguishing between *self-referential* and *canonical* messages as two aspects of ritual communication. Self-referential messages are the most variable expressions of ritual and are directly linked to the psychical and social status of performers of the ritual. In some rituals there is nothing more than the expression of status by participants. However, most religious rituals also contain a canonical message, which is invariable and cannot express the status of the participants because it was not encoded by them. Rappaport used the example of the Roman Catholic liturgy, which cannot be changed by the will of the participants. He argued that canonical messages, which are not encoded by the performers, but transmitted by them during a ritual, are invariable and more intimately linked to an order other than to the social. These orders are not seen as mystical in his theory, they are rather material, maintaining ecological balance in the environment where those humans live who practice these rituals, ensuring their survival and reproduction. 'The self-referential represents the immediate, the particular and the vital aspects of events; the canonical, in contrast, represents the general, enduring, or even eternal aspects of universal orders' (Rappaport, 1999, 53). In the terms of his example, the Roman Catholic liturgy is invariable, but participants may vary from one Mass to another. With my focus on practical religion, I am more concerned with the

expressions that Rappaport labelled self-referential (e.g. how participants express their status during the Mass). Nevertheless, to some degree I address canonical aspects in a more dynamic manner. Rappaport's distinction can be reformulated in order to explain how canonical messages can become subject to manipulation.

Instead of simply accepting that some orders are eternal and universal, one can look at how they are universalised in order to appear more eternal and less social. Those in control of rituals have the power to change the borderline between the self-referential and the canonical by either enhancing or de-emphasising the canonical side of a ritual. Expansion comes about as part of the canonisation of previously non-canonical (i.e. self-referential) aspects. This process invests certain features of the social order with sacrality. For example, a certain way of dressing might become compulsory in a ritual that initially had no dressing canon, as I show in my analysis of confirmation. The inverse process lies in the minimisation of the canonical element by focusing on basic social constructs (e.g. ideas about the human body that take its biological basis as universal). This strategy is less demanding in terms of material and social preconditions, but has direct implications for conceptions of personhood. Pentecostal conversion uses this form, and I later demonstrate how conversion influences social interaction and social structure by proposing and maintaining a new form of personhood which I will discuss after first analysing the confirmation ritual.

This study is based on fieldwork carried out between June 2003 and September 2004. My work began in Cluj before moving into 'Gánás' in late August 2003. I gathered most of my data through participant observation, but I also gathered genealogies, data on social networks, life histories and conversion narratives. My native tongue is Hungarian, I learned to speak Romanian while growing up and receiving my education in Romania.

I belong to none of the denomination I studied. I was a relative outsider to the area, because my native town is in eastern Transylvania. To enable my full participation in Roma life, I began to learn a local Romani dialect from June to August 2003 in Cluj with the help of an elderly Romni. By the time I moved to the village I was able to understand exchanges in this language. Later I developed competence to interact and do simple interviews in Romani. As most of the local Roma (called Romungre/Hungarian Gypsies) are trilingual, and frequent code switching in everyday conversations is a rule. As a result, all of these languages proved to be important for my research.

The official language of the Calvinist rituals is Hungarian, while most of the preaching during the Pentecostal services is done in Romanian. Songs are also performed in Romani, although the conversion narratives and testimonies are most often Romanian.

### **Confirmation ritual as the masking of social and ethnic divisions in a village**

The village of Gánás appears to an outsider to be rather underdeveloped. In spite of the relative proximity of the city, the village lacks modern infrastructure such as pavement on the streets, sewerage, gas heating, and a communication system. In contrast to fast development of Cluj, Gánás seems to be an island of past and tradition. The village has approximately 1 400 inhabitants: roughly two third of them are Hungarians, one third Roma and a handful of Romanians. Ethnic relations and social life are organised in many respects on the basis of patterns that can be better understood according to the long-term social history of the settlement than in terms of the recent past of socialism. The social life of the village seems to have followed the path from socialism into postsocialism without major ruptures. Some elements of religious life that were more hidden during socialist times have become more visible.

People more readily claim religiosity and ethnic belonging in public (e.g. confirmation rituals are increasingly attended by outsiders, and ritual called Village Days were created), religious education has been introduced in school, and a church-related foundation has become active. The most visible changes are perceivable in the revitalisation of rituals that create new, public events for locals (see also Fosztó, 2007).

The major life-cycle rituals among Roma in Gánás are baptism, confirmation, and burial. Each marks a person's transition from one stage of life to another – childhood, adulthood, and death – with religious rituals and celebrations involving Roma and Hungarians alike. The absence of marriage among the main rituals might at first seem startling, but during my stay in the village I witnessed no marital ceremonies among the Roma and learned that this was generally the rule.

I will analyse the confirmation ritual (Hun: *konfirmáció*) in this subsection. This ritual is organised by the local pastor and controlled directly by the church, unlike baptism or funerals, where the pastor plays 'his role', but the ritual sequence is controlled by the families involved. Boys and girls aged 13 to 14 are usually expected to undergo confirmation, which is preceded by a preparatory course. Hungarian and Roma teenagers alike attend the course, with varying degrees of interest. The class culminates in a public examination and solemn confirmation of the participant's commitment to the faith. The ritual examination (Hun: *kikérdezés*) is conducted by the pastor in the presence of the congregation in the church. The youth to be confirmed (Hun: *konfirmándus*) must demonstrate his or her knowledge of the catechism (Hun: *káté*) and a mastery of canonical religious texts and songs. After the examination, teenagers are expected to utter a prayer in order to 'confirm their faith' and ask to be admitted as adult members of the church. The rest of the assembly (Hun: *gyülekezet*) replies with a ritual 'yes', accepting the young people as full members. Following the confirmation ritual, new mem-

bers are offered their first communion (Hun: *Úrvacsora*, literally 'Lord's Supper'). In Gánás the ritual takes place on two consecutive Sundays in early spring. First the examination and confirmation are performed. One week later the new members take their first communion. The latter occasion is usually planned to take place on Palm Sunday. A family celebration is usually organised for the afternoon following the second Sunday church service.

According to both canonical interpretation and popular understanding, confirmation is a coming-of-age ritual through which members assume full responsibilities in the assembly. The teenager awaiting confirmation and the entire community also endorses a non-religious meaning of confirmation: the event is a public recognition of the confirmer's passing into adulthood. This traditionally meant that boys and girls were allowed to begin courting. Among the Roma I met were several cases in which marriages were contracted as soon as the girl had confirmed her faith (Hun: *konfirmált*). Similarly, young marriages were not uncommon among Hungarians in earlier periods. Nevertheless, many Roma in Gánás reach adulthood without being confirmed. The most important reasons for this are that the preparations for confirmation, which include purchasing clothing and provisioning the celebration, are expensive, and confirmation places large demands on the teenager—an inadequate performance exposes the youth to public humiliation.

The risk of humiliation is even greater for Roma boys and girls, because their native tongue is not Hungarian, and many of them are illiterate. They are expected to memorise and recite passages of the catechism, a text that is in some parts incomprehensible even to adult native speakers of Hungarian. The basic text of the Heidelberg Catechism (Hun: *Heidelbergi Káté*) was originally written in German (1563). Officially, it was introduced into the Transylvanian Calvinist Church in 1646, and it is still in use. Even updated Hungarian translations abound

in archaisms and grammatical structures not commonly used in colloquial speech. During the public examination, youths need not only prove their knowledge of the catechism and commitment to the faith, but they also need to demonstrate their ability to publicly express their endorsement of the values shared by the local ethno-religious community.

Hungarian teenagers, too, have difficulty fulfilling the strict requirements of the ritual. Pastors are aware of the limitations of the young faithful and let them know in some form which of the questions they will be asked during the examination – for example, by repeatedly asking the same question during the preparations. The degree of difficulty of the answers also varies – some answers are long and complicated while others are simple – the pastor is careful to adjust the questions to the individual abilities of the teenagers. In this way the youths are expected to memorise only a few answers, not the entirety of the catechism, which frees them to concentrate on the public performance of the answers.

Religious education was introduced in Romanian schools only after the fall of socialism, but pastors have always taught preparatory classes for confirmation in the parish house. This practice was uninterrupted even during socialism. Local girls and boys were taught the meaning of basic rituals and were introduced to the history of Calvinism in Transylvania and the lives of the Hungarian Calvinist heroes. Because the Calvinist faith in Transylvania is strongly associated with Hungarians, confirmation preparations not only transmit religious knowledge to village youths, but also socialises them as Calvinist Hungarians (Hun: *református magyarok*). Therefore, in addition to its religious and life-cycle aspects, confirmation can be understood as a symbolic expression of membership in the local community and as an assertion of ethnic belonging. I limit the following discussion to these aspects.

In the spring of 2004, six girls and six boys were confirmed in Gánás. Five of them, four girls and one boy, came from families

considered by locals to be ‘Gypsy’. Nevertheless, an outside observer could notice no differences in social status, class, mother tongue, or ethnicity expressed in the ritual. Individual differences were carefully controlled, and the social divisions of the community were masked throughout the ritual action. In other words, aspects of the ritual that might have revealed the social status of the participants – aspects that Roy Rappaport (1999) would have called self-referential – were minimised. One way such differences were masked was through a reduction of the requirements for confirmation. That is, the public examination was transformed into a performance of a few sentences that were assigned and tacitly agreed upon by the pastor and his pupils. This practice is not limited to Gánás but rather is the rule in Calvinist assemblies all across Transylvania. I heard of only one instance of outcry, which occurred in a nearby village when a young pastor did not divulge beforehand which questions would be asked of examinees, as is customary. The parents of these teenagers and members of the church council pressured the pastor to ‘train’ the youths in the usual way in order to avoid public failure. Reduced requirements ‘help the weaker’ members of the cohort undergo the ritual more smoothly. These ‘weaker’ confirmees are not exclusively Roma; in the case I witnessed, one Roma girl’s recitation of the verses was the most appreciated performance of the entire ritual.

Another element of the ritual that masks difference is the standardised dress code. In Gánás the dress code for the first Sunday, on which the examination occurs, requires folk costumes for all examinees. On the second Sunday, when first communion is taken, girls are expected to wear white dresses and boys must wear dark suits. Typical folk dresses for the region are colourful and heavily decorated. The costume for unmarried females consists of boots (often red), a colourful long skirt and apron, an embroidered shirt worn with a vest, and a heavy tiara with beads (Hun: *párta*). Boys wear embroidered short

coats (Hun: *bujka*), boots, and hats decorated with maidenhair ferns (*Stipa borysthenica*; Hun: *árvalányhaj*). Folk costumes can be expensive, particularly for girls; villagers estimate that some elements of a girl's clothing are 'worth the price of a buffalo'. Roma usually borrow these costumes from Hungarian families for the occasion. The white costume that the girls wear on the second Sunday is purchased or custom tailored. A third costume is also purchased and worn by girls at the party following the ritual.

The dress code appears to be more elaborate and standardised today than it was after the Second World War. Some elderly Roma women recall that they wore only simple white dresses or custom-tailored garments and white aprons for the confirmation ritual. Looking at customary keepsake cards, which are prepared from photographs taken after the ritual, one finds that boys did not dress in folk costumes during the late socialist period. The separation of the confirmation ritual into two events is not prescribed by church canon; in other villages the ritual is performed over the course of a single Sunday. All these elements of the ritual point to a relatively recent canonisation of some of its self-referential aspects. The homogeneous appearance of the local community during the ritual is a product of this canonisation, which involves the incorporation of non-canonical elements into a ritual that originally had no dress code. This ritualised masking of status differences is not ethnically neutral. The canonisation of a dress code is invested with ethnic meaning by both participants and outsiders who observe the ritual.

The confirmation ritual represents the local community primarily as a homogeneous ethno-religious group. This is partly due to the church's greater direct influence. The preparations for, and performance of, this ritual are closely supervised by the local pastor. Yet the Calvinist Church is directly associated with ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania, and so confirmation is not only a coming-of-age ritual. It is also an expression of the vitality of the local community

and, more generally, of the Hungarian ethnic community. The homogeneous appearance of the Hungarian community is produced through the canonisation of some aspects of the ritual that were previously informal (e.g. the incorporation of locally and ethnically marked dress codes into the ritual). Although many Roma do not undergo this ritual, there are always Roma participants at confirmations. They tacitly accept the masking of social and ethnic divisions in this ritual and contribute to the maintenance of a homogeneous appearance by the local Hungarian community in exchange for symbolic incorporation into the local society. The practical implications of this incorporation are varied ranging from local economical interactions to the forms of local solidarity or „rural civility” expressed by the locals regardless of their ethnic belonging (for details see Fosztó, 2006).

### **Conversions: sincerity, the heart, and other tangible signs**

*Na dikh tu, na dikh tu ke hom kalo,  
numa o Del, numa o Del prinzhanel munro  
jilo.*

(Do not look, do not look that I am black,  
God alone, God alone knows my heart.)

These two lines are taken from a Pentecostal song popular among Roma converts. The opposition it expresses between the outer appearance of the person, which others see as *kalo* (black), and his or her inner quality, which can be recognised only through the divine relationship, is a major distinction that builds upon the converted self. The statement that God knows (Rom: *prinzhanel*) the heart of the convert is seen as reciprocal, because the verb *prinzhanel* is used to express a relatively intimate acquaintance between two people, as opposed to the more distant relationship between a person and an object known from the 'outside' (Rom: *zhanel*). Therefore, once God recognises the

heart of the convert, the convert also comes to know the personal God. I often heard this expression when I asked people if they ‘knew’ God. People rarely responded in the negative, even among unconverted Roma.

One can come to know God through either fortuitous or inauspicious events, through divinely inspired dreams, and through hearing voices. All of these paths to God are available for converts, but the main difference between converts and non-converts is that converts claim to have a more intimate connection with God, using their open hearts to communicate. Escaping from a difficult situation or being miraculously healed does not necessarily lead to conversion. If somebody had not made a ‘covenant’ with God, and if the Holy Spirit had not ‘sealed’ him or her, she or he will continue with pre-conversion lives. But the person who experiences these events fosters special connections with God, and begins to become a different person. Such new personhood, however, is not always easily validated in the social contexts of converts.

Even if outsiders accept a special connection between converts and God, a puzzle persists: What can secret relationships with God, which are encapsulated in the hearts of converts, reveal to, and validate for, the outside world? The unconverted may refuse to accept these relationships or not recognise them as real. An outsider, even if he or she accepts the existence of God, may doubt the veracity of the convert’s claimed connection to God. Converts have their own way of dealing with outsiders: they insist on the truth of their special relationship with God and express this connection in ritual forms. A convert can distinguish between ‘real believers’ and those who ‘think of themselves as being Christians’ on the basis of the verifiable existence (or lack thereof) of a strong relationship with God. The construction of this relationship is contingent on a definition of inner self engendered by an opposition between outside and inside. The oft-repeated sentence ‘God does not look at the face of a person, but at his heart’ (Rou: *Dumnezeu*

*nu se uită la fața omului, se uită la inima lui*) is a clear example of this opposition, which places the heart at the centre of the inner self. It is important that the heart be ‘open’, because the only path to self-transformation is that of inviting and accepting Jesus into one’s heart. The main cause of failed conversion is a refusal on the part of the would-be convert to accept the word of God into his or her heart (Rou: *Nu primești cuvintele lui Dumnezeu la inimă*).

Once the centre of the self is established and opened to the influence of God, changes become observable in the life of the convert. Ideally, the main consequence is an inner-driven unity of self and behaviour that can be recognised in the convert’s everyday practices. Adopting a term used by Webb Keane (2002), I refer to this unity of self and behaviour as *sincerity*. There is no exact equivalent in the everyday speech of Roma converts; the closest term Roma use is *patjivalo* (‘honest’), which refers to reliability in social interactions. *Patjivalo* is opposed to *ravasz* (‘cunning’, a loan word from Hungarian), which describes people who hide their true intentions. The ideal of converted selfhood requires honesty and complete transparency. Keane points out that the ideal of sincerity assumes a clear distinction between words and thoughts, it presupposes a hierarchical relationship between inner self and speech, and it seeks the authority of words as accurate reflections of inner states. Moreover, the idea of sincerity demands effort from speakers to match their words to their inner states. Therefore, sincerity connects ideas about language to moral questions (Keane, 2002, 75). When the sincerity of words uttered by a convert is contested by non-converts, as often happens, the morality of the convert is called into question.

While I was recording conversion narratives in Gánás, my host’s daughter-in-law, who was in her early twenties and whose parents had converted to Pentecostalism when she was a teenager, warned me against accepting these narratives as ‘true’. ‘Converts

lie a lot [Rom : *O pokaiti but xoxavel*],’ she told me. Her view was shared by others, who expressed their reservations not only behind the backs of converts, but also directly to some of them. One middle-aged male convert who was trying to publicly recount his conversion narrative was interrupted and ridiculed by some youngsters. These observations point to the variable success of self-transformation attempts : successful conversions depend largely upon converts being socially accepted and their choices reinforced by forces beyond their control.

An audience must accept verbal utterances as valid in order for them to attain their performative force. Therefore, the importance of the Pentecostal assembly and ritual gatherings cannot be over estimated : they provide a sympathetic audience for the convert undergoing self-transformation. To be sure, though, accounts do exist in which the process is initiated outside of a ritual setting. Although a prayer uttered by a kneeling, crying man is form of worship which is much the norm in Pentecostal assemblies. During services, emotional individual prayers are encouraged during long prayer sessions that alternate with singing, individual testimonies, and preaching. Church services provide ideal settings for developing and practicing connections with the divine in the presence of fellow converts. The prayers uttered are improvised ; the emphasis is on affective expression and immediate communication with the Holy Spirit and Jesus. These occasions also provide a setting in which congregants speak in tongues, a practice believed to signal that the speaker has been overcome by the Holy Spirit and is in immediate communication with God. Such an atmosphere can impress even a non-believer. Nico, an elder Romni, described to me her first experience at a Pentecostal service, which she attended with her adult daughter. During the collective prayer the two exchanged sceptical looks and suppressed smiles. On the way home they joked about the people who had been crying during the prayer. But

as they continued attending services, they, too, started to cry during the prayer sessions. ‘First I thought they were crazy [Rom : *dinjile*], but then we started to cry also.’

‘Opening the heart’ is not necessarily an intentional act ; it can occur spontaneously during the ritual, beyond the control or will of the affected person. The further step of ‘filling the heart’ with God (i.e. making a commitment) requires more conscious activity and social control. A ritual in which the convert raises his or her hand, goes to the front of the congregation, and verbalises some variant of a prayer marks the initiation of this process (I discuss this ritual in the next section). Following this commitment, the active contribution of the assembly is of paramount importance. Most assemblies in Cluj have special structures for incorporating and educating future members. ‘Groups for growth’ (Rou : *grupuri de creștere*) are small study groups that gather at the house of a member for this purpose, although few of the Roma converts I met had been incorporated into their congregations in this way. My informants usually participated in less systematic and less formal gatherings in village homes, or they went through a short preparatory course in a church before their baptism. Baptism may take place as soon as the course has been completed, and people drop out of the church fairly frequently. When discussing his experience with Roma converts, a Romanian Pentecostal pastor in the city expressed his view that Roma converts might accept Jesus more easily than members of other ethnic groups, but they were not consistent enough in repenting. He gave the example of a young Roma who, in the assembly, cried loudly, ‘Oh, how nice it is to be with you, my Lord ! [Rou : *Oh, ce mișto e cu tine, Doamne*],’ but the pastor found the man’s commitment superficial<sup>2</sup>.

There is one non-verbal aspect of assembly life in which the sincerity of church members is continuously tested. Pentecostal churches rely heavily on contributions from members, who are expected to tithe (Rou : *zeciuală*) regularly. But because most Roma

live on irregular and often very small incomes, the pastor and other members cannot directly determine how much each member should be expected to contribute. If church members do not pay their tithes for some time, their economic survival can be seen as proof of insincerity in the domain of the material world, because they are thought to be hiding their income and failing to support the church financially. Therefore, the financial obligations of church members constitute a recurring sermon topic. The pastor of the Roma church in Cluj spent a considerable proportion of his sermons reminding congregants that their donations would be multiplied and returned to them by God.

Converts find support and encouragement inside the assembly, but they sometimes find themselves the targets of suspicious looks in their broader community. In Gánás, unconverted Roma and the Hungarian majority look from ‘outside’ upon Pentecostals’ observance of ascetic rules. This is particularly true in the case of male converts who were once known as drinkers. In a community in which drinking is a common form of male sociability, men who quit drinking rupture connections with their peer groups. This is compensated for by the alternative community with which converts are connected through conversion, but they may still be tempted to join their former buddies for drinks<sup>3</sup>. Discussing alcohol consumption with two converted Roma in the village, I was told that it would be wrong for a converted person to drink even an alcohol-free beer. They explained that if one is a known convert and is seen by non-converts drinking beer, it would encourage the non-converts to continue drinking and so would damage the image of Pentecostals in the larger community. In this way converts in Gánás exclude themselves from many settings of male Roma sociability. On Sundays one can see these people dressed in elegant suits, carrying Bibles or hymnals, and even donning eyeglasses that they do not normally wear on weekdays. Greetings of ‘Peace!’ (Rou : *páce*) are exchanged, and converts shake

hands. Even when the gathering is at a local home, a visible attempt is made to celebrate the day. For a larger event such as a visitation by an outside pastor, a group of converts from the city or from neighbouring villages may gather for a bigger service in the local Baptist prayer house on the main square of the village. Pentecostals and the few Baptists in Gánás (also local Roma) celebrate such occasions together.

A local preacher was married to a Romni from another village, and she usually joined the Pentecostals in their services. She had been baptised along with another young Roma by a Baptist pastor from the city during a missionary event in her village. The priest brought a large plastic container, which he filled with water. The converts were submerged in the water, much to the astonishment of the onlookers, among whom was the local Orthodox priest. The services of a photographer were enlisted to immortalise the event for the newly baptised members (as was the case in the confirmation ceremony discussed previously). The photograph, which is displayed in their house, was tangible evidence of her conversion. She showed me the picture, proudly stating that the event had been organised solely to baptise the two converts and show the villagers a ‘real baptism’.

The refrain of the song quoted earlier is the following :

*Oh che shukar, oh che shukar o Isus si amaro phral,*

*Oh che shukar, oh che shukar vas amenge vo muleas !*

(Oh, how wonderful [it is] ; oh, how wonderful, Jesus is our brother,

Oh, how wonderful [it is] ; oh, how wonderful, he died for us !)

The idea of brotherhood (and sisterhood, in the case of women) expressed in these lines is composed of several elements. On the one hand, fraternity with Jesus is a privilege of those who join Pentecostal assemblies. On the other, the option of joining an

assembly is open to the wider community. This ideal of spiritual kinship is therefore simultaneously encompassing and elitist. The encompassing element of such brotherhood and sisterhood can be demonstrated through its trans-local character. 'Brothers' (*phrala*) are everywhere in Romania and abroad, and this spiritual kinship network can be further extended through the incorporation and conversion of 'outsiders' from congregants' immediate social surroundings.

My survey on godfatherhood in Gánás included both converted and unconverted families. All the converted families retained *kirve* (co-godparents) relations from pre-conversion times and had no difficulty imagining how they would extend their traditional spiritual kinship network when a new baby was born. Some converts were quick to point out that this was not how Pentecostals should deal with newborn babies and would-be members. Ideally, Pentecostal spiritual fraternisation was not embedded in the local community, and the pool of potential recruits was not pre-defined. But the practice of brotherhood in Gánás was neither disembedded from, nor totally encompassed by, existing local and kinship ties. If one takes the creation of mutual aid networks as an example of the fraternity's local function, then the relations of converted brothers is similar (in many cases coinciding with) secular kin-relations. During my stay in the village I observed a situation in which aid was distributed among Pentecostal brothers. A pastor who lived in another village, but had familial connections in Gánás sent word to the village preacher that he was to be entrusted with managing the distribution of clothing donations from abroad. The pastor did not drive all the way into Gánás, so the local preacher waited for the aid truck at the main road and hired a local cart to carry the cargo to the village. He received 17 large bags filled with clothes, loaded them on the cart, and brought them to the Roma neighbourhood in which he lived. The clothing was distributed according to lines of kinship. The preacher kept six bags each for himself and his brother-in-law

and distributed the remaining five to the most active converts in the assembly, who each received one bag. The recipients further distributed, exchanged, or sold the clothing among the local Roma.

In its ideal form, the brotherhood is both a voluntary association and an elite organisation, but these ideas must be contextualised within the local social structure. When one considers socio-economic stratification in the village, it becomes apparent that the transformation of the self and construction of the converted community offers an opportunity for upward social mobility for people from lower status positions. The desire for upward mobility does not directly challenge extant ethnic and status divisions. Everyday practices and signs of conversion create a sense of belonging for the self-styled religious elite without relying on or opposing pre-existing local social structures. People whom the local majority have otherwise seen as marginal acquire access to symbolic resources that promise to change their position through recourse to resources external to local structures. The practice of brotherhood relies on existing local ties and reinforces the boundary of the converted 'elite community'.

## Conclusions

The recent success of Pentecostalism in Romania can be interpreted as an example of the strength of a rather 'culturally neutral' religious movement among some segments of the population in a period when traditional churches are engaged in 'culturally sensitive' revitalisations. Other main aspect which was revealed by the case studies are the attractiveness of a culturally neutral approach to religious expansion in the city and the influence of ethnicity on the growth of Pentecostalism. Although the salience of ethnicity seemingly contradicts the characteristics of a culturally neutral movement, the explanation lies with the overall low status of the Roma ethnicity which in fact has a reverse effect on the conversions: Roma

are less bound to the culturally sensitive approach of the big churches, as these churches often formulate their appeal in national terms (which are often exclusivist). In this sense the cultural values salient in the mainline discourse keep Roma in a marginal position within these communities, and therefore, Roma often prefer the culturally more neutral approach of the neo-protestants, in this case the Pentecostals.

The main feature of the representative public sphere in the village is the symbolic suppression of differences and maintenance of the appearance of a homogeneous 'local community'. That community is ethnically marked as Hungarian for outsiders, but local interactions are often not marked by ethnicity. The representative public sphere masks both local social divisions and local effects of transformations in the broader Romanian society. At the local level, the production of a 'unified locality' through ritual is dependent on the relative religious homogeneity of the village and the tacit agreement of all participants to maintain homogeneous appearances. Roma participate in the representative public sphere of the village, and they tacitly agree to uphold the appearance of a unified community. However, the Roma have different ways of maintaining their own identity inside their families and small communities. Although the local community frames the lives of Roma villagers, individuals do not see themselves as subordinated to the community. Additionally shared cultural traits such as language and folklore are not politicised as a means of expressing a separate collective identity.

I addressed earlier the development of Roma ethno-politics (Foszto, 2003) and concluded that segments of the Roma elite were beginning to experiment with political projects in the wake of the collapse of socialism and emergence of a market economy. The emergence of conventional cultural politics, involving the use of selected and standardised cultural features in collective mobilisation,

has yielded limited success up to this point (see also Barany, 2002). These earlier conclusions need to be revisited in light of my study of conversion and ritual revitalisation in a Transylvanian village (Foszto, 2009). Maintaining that political mobilisation based on cultural politics has strong limitations among Transylvanian Roma groups, I suggest that religious conversion illustrates the possibility of alternative forms of grass-roots social activism. Anthropologists working among Gypsies in France (Williams, 1984) and Spain (Gay y Blasco, 2002) have noted the emergence of new ethno-religious categories (e.g. *notre peuple* and *pueblo*, respectively) that overcome traditional divisions between Gypsy groups (e.g. Manouche, Rom, Gitano) as a consequence of religious conversion. Incipient signs of similar developments can be observed in Transylvania, but status divisions among Roma groups seem to remain at this point.

### Notes

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1. The separation of culture and religion is more characteristic of the Western philosophical traditions and less recognized in some other parts of the world where 'religion', 'custom' and 'culture' are categories which mostly overlap, making a distinction between these concepts difficult to maintain. While I cannot enter a discussion on this issue here, I do consider the religion/culture distinction as valid for the Romanian context.

2. *Mișto* [Rom: *mistho*, 'good'] is a loan word from Romani in Romanian meaning 'good' or 'nice'. It is used in informal contexts and has an ironic connotation in official contexts (see also Leschber, 1995, 167).

3. M. Kearney (Kearney, 1970) described similar problems related to conversion to Adventism in the case of a peasant community in Mexico.

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