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Gypsy Guilds (Esnafs) on the Balkans

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Abstract: Unlike Central and Western Europe, where the access of Gypsies to the professional guilds of the local population was denied for centuries, in the conditions of Ottoman Empire the participation in guilds of Gypsies, who were full-fledged subjects of the Empire, was perceived as something completely acceptable and normal. Formally the Ottoman Empire regulated legally the activities of the guilds only in 1773, the historical data shows that many Gypsies living in Constantinople/Istanbul, were members of different guilds already in previous centuries. Although the guilds in principle should not be detached ethnically, in the 19th c., along with the development of national movements among the Balkan nations, a process of separation of guilds along ethnic lines started. In the general context of these processes at the end of the 19th c. were already registered separate Gypsy guilds in the Ottoman Empire, and later in the new independent Balkan states too. The article introduces three flags of Gypsy craftsmen guilds (blacksmith in Prizren and Resen, and potters in Kyustendil), preserved until now. The history of the Gypsy guilds is reconstructed primarily on the basis of materials from oral history of Gypsy (Roma and Balkan Egyptians) communities. It shows the place of the guild's flags in the overall life of the respective communities and their use in various calendar and family celebrations, customs and rituals, including nowadays, and presented also the development of some of the traditions of Gypsy guilds for regulation of relations in the local Gypsy communities. During the last two decades the historical heritage of the Gypsy guilds acquires again new forms and functions. Festivities themselves and used flags are seen already not only and not so much as an event connected to given occupation but as an expression of preservation and demonstration of community traditions, as a manifestation of the ethnic identity (Roma and Balkan Egyptians).

Keywords: Gypsy Guilds, Flags, Roma, Balkan Egyptians, Ethnic Identities

Despite sharply increased interest in Romani studies in recent years, the history of Gypsies (known nowadays under politically correct cover term 'Roma', which is however not quite precise from an academic point of view) in the Ottoman Empire stands in some way aloof from the general research interest. There are already available numerous studies on various aspects of the history of the Gypsies (described as *Kıptı* or *Çingene* in historical sources) in the Ottoman Empire (Marushiakova and Popov 2001a; Çelik 2003; 2004; 2008; 2013ab; Dinceç 2004; 2014; Ginio 2004; Altınöz 2013; Sezgin 2015). Surprisingly enough however when writing about 'Roma' in general and when they are regarded as an 'underlying unity' (Matras 2004: 55-56), existing historical evidence about their presence in the Ottoman Empire, consciously or not, are often ignored and passed over in silence. The explanation for this is actually quite simple.

These historical sources contradict the desire to avoid the 'ethnicity as a death-trap' (Willems 2001). In order to set the ethnic dimension apart many scholars define Roma either as economically-deprived group (underclass), or as cultural group, or as social and/or political construction, or combination of several different characteristics is used (Acton 1997; Acton and Mundy 1997; Stewart 1997; 2002; 2013; Szelényi 2001; Emigh and Szelényi 2001; Surdu 2015; Surdu and Kovats 2015).

The Ottoman sources contradict also the imagination of Gypsies as free, eternal nomads, “un peuple sans patrie” (Stewart 1991), which continue to be one of the most durable public and academic stereotypes.

The historical sources in contrary to the above stereotypes prove that already in Ottoman Empire the Gypsies were full fledged subject of Sultan, or to say it with modern social and political terminology – the full-fledged citizens. They were also clearly defined as a distinct ethnic community (something that is relatively rare Ottoman Empire). The majority of them led settled way of life, and as such they were included in the existing social structures. A typical example in this respect is the participation of Gypsies in the overall system of the ‘esnaf’, which is Ottoman Turkish term for ‘guild’, with the same meaning of powerful professional association for mutual aid, who controlled the practice of their craft in a particular town.

The Esnafs have occupied an important place in the overall social structure of the Ottoman Empire (Faroqhi 2005; Yıldırım 2008). Formally the Ottoman Empire regulated legally the activities of the guilds only in 1773, but the historical data shows that many Gypsies living in Constantinople/Istanbul, were members of different guilds already in previous centuries. An important source about the place of Gypsies in the guild system are the notes of famous author Evliya Çelebi who used the list of esnafs in Istanbul, made on the orders of Sultan Murad IV (1623-1640). At that time the Gypsies were living in the neighborhood Ayvansaray in the Balata quarter. The list contains 57 esnafs; the Gypsies are mentioned for the first time in the 10th esnaf, that of the bear-trainers, which consisted of 70 men in total. The 15th esnaf is of horse-traders (*cambaz*) consisting of 300 men, and as Evliya Çelebi wrote: “These horse-traders are wealthy traders, each one of them having stables of 40-50 Arab horses; most of them are Gypsies although there are some who belong to other peoples”. The 43rd guild that of the musicians, consisted of 300 people, also mostly Gypsies. The 45th guild comprised the actors, mime artists and boy dancers. This guild had 12 sub-divisions, the first one of which consisted of 3,000 persons, most of them Gypsies (Çelebi 1967: 207-336). Already here is noticed the beginning of the formation of esnafs according ethnicity.

The ethnicization of the guilds in the Ottoman Empire in 19th century was directly related to general processes of ethnicization in the Empire and were part of the national movements of the Balkan peoples during this period, which with some delay encompassed also the Gypsies. At the end of the 19th century famous folklorist Marko Tsepenkov published a description of Gypsy esnafs (of farriers, musician and porters) in city of Prilep (today Republic of Macedonia). These esnafs had their own Patron saint’s day. As Marko Tsepenkov explains:

The reason behind all this is the Gypsy barber called Ilia Naumchev. ... He was not ashamed to call himself an ‘Egyptian’, because, as he explained, the name came from Egypt. This man hoped very much for a Gypsy priest. ... After he gained respect among the Gypsies he convinced the three guilds to celebrate St. Anthony’s day (Цепенков 1898: 181).

On the Balkans, as the Patron Saint of blacksmiths by Gypsies and by the Christian majority as well is honored St. Athanasius, and rarely also St. Anthony. As Marko

Tsepenkov notes in the city of Prilep the Patron feast of the local guild of blacksmiths was on the day of St. Athanasius (18th January), while the guild of “Gypsy blacksmiths” and the guilds of “fiddlers and porters” (a separate ones) venerated St. Antonius, which is on the 17th January, ie demarcation of the guilds on ethnic lines was clearly visible also at that time (Цепенков 1898: 181).

Ilija Naumchev was the author, who under the pseudonym “One Egyptian”, for the first time in history made the issue of Gypsy emancipation public. In an article (“A Letter to the Editor”) in Bulgarian newspaper *Macedonia* published in Istanbul in 1867 he defended the ‘historical right’ of the Egyptians to have their own church, education in their mother tongue, and ultimately their own country (Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 40). By irony of the fate Ilija Naumchev ended his life as an orthodox priest in Bulgarian Exarchate (Цепенков 1898: 181), and today in his hometown Prilep any memory about him disappeared among the local Gypsy community.

The Gypsy guilds do not disappear with the end of the Ottoman Empire. In the condition of the new independent states in the Balkans the esnafs transformed and modernized but continue to occupy an important place in the life of the community.

The Gypsy esnaf’s organizations continued to exist, albeit for a limited period of time also in the new independent states in the Balkans that arose during 19th century after the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire. In Bulgaria, for example, in the last decade of the 19th century, in the capital city of Sofia, in two of the existing neighborhoods, in the *Shakh mahalla* and *Hadji Manov bridge mahalla*, only settling of Gypsy blacksmiths and tinsmiths was allowed (Мизов 2007: I, 217), which shows that even the homes of the members of Gypsy guilds were territorially detached.

The Gypsy esnafs take active part even in the public life of the city. This confirms the famous historian Konstantin Jirecek: “On official holidays beside Bulgarian and Turkish craftsmen and beside Jews with their gold scrolls goes Gypsy guild with their red flag” (Иречек 1899 II: 33), i.e. with their guild’s banner.

Between the two world wars the professional associations of Gypsies in Bulgaria made attempts to acquire national-wide dimensions, but remain confined within individual Gypsy groups, linked to certain traditional occupation. In 1920 in Sofia the group of Gypsy musicians (many of them military musicians), held a meeting with aim to create their national-wide professional association (see Illustrations). In 1938 the First Moslem basket-weavers mutual help association was established in Sofia.

Moreover, on the basis of the professional association, descendants of the guilds, arise the first Gypsy civic and political organizations *Sofia’s Common Moslem Educational and Cultural Mutual Aid Organisation “Istikbal - Future”* in 1919 and the *Common Mohammedan-Gypsy Cultural and Educational and Mutual Aid Union* in 1930, in the statutes of which this continuity is explicitly emphasized (Marushiakova and Popov 2015: 197-199).

The 20th century was for the Balkan states the time of accelerated modernization, a process that encompassed the entire social and economic life. Under these conditions the importance of the guilds decreased, they lose their public positions and gradually began to disappear and this process finally ended after World War II. In regard of Gypsy esnafs

however these processes acquired new dimensions – from societal phenomena they became part of community life in variety of fields.

In language, in Romani dialect of the *Kalajdži* group from city of Montana in Bulgaria the word ‘esnaf’ is used today in sense of “clever, cunning person”. Interestingly enough is that in this community is no memory preserved about past existence of guilds and thinsmithing occupation.

In Sofia, in Gypsy neighborhoods Konyovitsa, Tatarli, Fakulteta and Filipovtsi (ie among the Gypsies who have lived for centuries settled in urban conditions) today exist the so-called *Londža* (Кметова 1992: 68-73; Marushiakova and Popov 1997: 164). These are non-formal associations, comprising of Roma women from a small circle, usually 10-20-30 friendly families. They establish a mutual support fund through collecting regularly small amount of money, which is used to give small interest-free loans to members in urgent need, and for organizing of common gatherings, excursions, family celebrations, etc., i.e. the *Londžas* preserve partially some the functions of the former guilds. The very name ‘Londzha’ is also inherited from the times of the esnafs – this was designation of the General Assembly of the guild. The guilds in past included only men, and after the guilds lost their social significance, the legacy of old esnafs was taken by women, who adapted this institution according their family needs.

A very special place among the historic legacy of the esnafs for Balkan Gypsies have the old guild flags (in times of the Ottoman Empire each guild had its own flags which were displayed during the general public processions and on the guilds’ holidays). Here we will present four such flags – one from the Republic of Macedonia, two from Kosovo and another one from Bulgaria. The information bellow was collected during our field researches over the past ten years in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo fulfilled with data from internet sources and communications.

The first esnaf flag is from city of Resen in Republic of Macedonia (cf. also Documentary *Знамето на ковачите – еснафи во Ресен*). This flag is red, and on it is a crescent with a star (symbol of the Ottoman Empire), and below them hammer, anvil and forge tongs that symbolize the occupational specialization of the esnaf. The inscriptions on the flag are in Ottoman-Turkish, written in calligraphic font. Left reads ‘Demirdzhi esnaf’, ie ‘Guild of Blacksmiths’. On the right is written “on temmuz”, ie “10th of July”, and this allows dating the designing the flag. On 10th July 1908 is announced the new constitution of the Ottoman Empire after Young Turk revolution. The officer, who started this revolution, Ahmed Niyazi Bey, was born in the town of Resen and in this city began the uprising. It is logical to assume that the banner was probably made in the period between 1908-1912, because in 1912 the First Balkan War started and after it the city of Resen ceases to belong to the Ottoman Empire.

In the family of Sherif Demirovski, where the banner is stored, and also among all the Gypsy community in the city (who today are with the ethnic identity of the Balkan Egyptians) are not preserved any memories about the existence of Gypsy esnaf and usage of the flag in this context. According to theirs, apparently secondary rationalization, the flag was made as an “emblem” of the community, is more than 300 years old, and was used (and is used until now) at all their weddings. The flag-bearer (*o Bayraktari*) is

specially designed person, who leads the wedding procession (in the past on horseback) on its way for taking the bride from her parents' home.

The next two esnaf flags are preserved in the city of Prizren in Kosovo. According to some Roma from the city the first flag is 640 years old and the second 64, but this is more a metaphor, reflecting the relationship between the two flags. On the first flag, in the center is written the year of its manufacture – 1227 by Islamic calendar, i.e. 1849. The second flag can not be dated exactly, but judging by its condition, possibly somewhere before World War II.

The first, bigger and older flag has three colors (see Illustrations). On the first, from right to left, on the white part, are inscribed three ayat (verse) from the Qur'an. On the third, pink part, are inscribed the names of the most important paigambars (prophets and preachers) mentioned in the Qur'an and other important figures in Islam. Most interesting here is the blue part in the middle of the flag. Except the names of Mohammed, Ali and his sons Hassan and Hussein, here are depicted articles illustrating the main occupations of the Gypsies. All of them are related to the iron work, but not all images can be clearly identified. In the center are hammer and anvil, and also ax and scissors. The scissors are especially important, because majority of Roma in Prizren are living in the *Terzi mahala*, ie 'Tailors neighborhood'. There are no known historical evidences about Gypsy guilds in Prizren during the Ottoman Empire, but most likely there was at least one Gypsy guild, a Gypsy blacksmiths esnaf and probably also an own Tailors esnaf. By analogy with other places, even if there have been two guilds, they had used only one common flag. Leading were the blacksmiths, as this activity was widespread among the Gypsies - up two decades ago in Prizren there were 65 blacksmiths' workshops, and even one of the central streets in the Terzi mahala is called *Fatatarde* ('Blacksmith street' in Albanian).

On the second, smaller flag (see Illustrations) are represented (except Islamic crescent moon with a star) also blacksmith devices (hammer, anvil, tongs) and articles (ax, two hoes). Clearly, this is a new replica of the old esnaf banner of blacksmiths. Producing of this flag is probably caused by the fact that after the withering away of the old Gypsy esnaf in interwar Yugoslavia, the guild's banner enters widely in the community life and a need to design a simplified replica of the old esnaf flag appeared. The old bigger flag remains to be used only for one big ceremonial occasion, and the small banner is widely used even today at weddings, family celebrations and outdoors accompanied by common feasts.

The big flag is displayed publicly only once a year, on a special feast called *Bajrakesko dive* ('Flag Day'), which is celebrated on weekend, which is two weeks after *Herdelez* or *Djurdjevdan*, both names are used (the Islamic Herdelez and Orthodox Christian Djurdjevdan), although Roma in Prizren are Muslims, in their most majority they are adherents of the Islamic Sufi order – the Halveti Tarikat. Their religious community includes only Gypsies, the head of the community is a Sheikh, as it is in similar non-Roma heterodox Islamic Communities (designated often summarizing the 'Dervishes') in the Western Balkans. On this day the flag is taken out. The specially chosen person, *o Bayraktari* (i.e. 'flag keeper'), together with the Sheikh and his entourage toured solemnly the whole Terzi mahala. During the touring the neighborhood

with the flag, accompanied by a music band, people kiss the banner, cover themselves with the flag (it is believed that this will bring 'Health'), women dance under the banner. Lambs and rams are slaughtered ritually for sacrifice, and part of the meat is distributed to the poor. There are also big feast outdoors. Overall celebration of the feast is largely similar to the celebration of Herdelez.

After the celebration in the Terzi mahala with the flag procession heads to the nearby village of Lez, where it is one of the oldest Turbes in Kosovo ('türbe' means tomb of an Islamic saint) – Baba Ymer. The grave of the saint is covered with guild's flag on which clothes are pounced (again it is believed that this will bring 'Health').

The celebration of the flag in the past was practiced only in Prizren and was not known to other Roma in Kosovo, but in recent years it has started to be celebrated in other villages too.

The last flag of Gypsy esnaf is from the city of Kyustendil in Bulgaria (see Illustrations). This flag is red, repeatedly restored. The oldest piece is appliqué depicts a porter with a wooden hook and rope, lifting load (barrel and crate). The inscription on the flag is "Kjus.[tendil] porter society 'Labour' - 1901". Association of the porters in Kyustendil was founded in 1901, ie in times of already independent Bulgaria. According to the oral history of Roma in Kyustendil the founder of the esnaf was well known for his strength porter Tair Selimov (Seliyata). After his death a special flag was crafted, and because in the past the Roma in Kyustendil were Muslims, the flag was sanctified by Imam. Last modification of the flag is from the end of the 40s, when the porters were included in the newly established labor-professional associations. On the old esnaf's flag have been added written abbreviate for United Workers Professional Unions on both sides of the figure, as well as new symbols of this era (four communist stars inscribed in the gears) on the edges.

In the past, the feast of the porters was celebrated on May 2, the day of the death of St. Athanasius, who was patron of the porters' esnaf in Kyustendil. This is a direct reference to the winter celebration of The St. Athanasius and the festival of Gypsy blacksmiths. Feast of the porters is currently celebrated on the 7th of May, this is the second day of *Hederlezi* or *Gergyovden* (both names of the feast are used), ie like in Prizren, the esnaf's day of celebration is associated with *Hederlez*. On this day a big common meal in the main square in the Gypsy neighborhood is organised with roasted lamb heads; meat from the slaughtered and cooked one day in advance lamb is distributed among widows and poor; and special *Hamalsko horo* ('porters circle dance') with the flag is danced (see also Ковачева 2015: 254-255).

Is stored an illustration of the Feast of the porters from the 60s of the twentieth century (see Illustrations). The photo documents festive dancing led by the head of the association of the porters, who is girded with a ribbon on which hangs a special hack hook. Over the years the festival almost died out, but during the last two decades it began a new life, restored is the festive procession with porters' flag (they use now restored duplicate), which goes around the mahala with music and common dancing.

A short summarization for the end. The Gypsy guilds emerge in the conditions of Ottoman Empire, as one of their main functions was to give societal dimensions to the

ethnic identity of the community and to demonstrate and perform this identity through the guilds detachment according the ethnic lines, and through participation in public events. In the next historical period, in the newly independent states in the Balkans, the Gypsy guilds gradually dying out in the public domain and are transferred on the community level, preserving their historical legacy through transformation into new forms and functions (most often through entering the festive life of the community and becoming a kind of replica of the largest community festival – *Hederlez*). During the last two decades the historical heritage of the Gypsy guilds acquires again new forms and functions. Especially important role in modern transformations have the old esnafs' flags and related community celebrations, which acquire new public dimension through their wide media coverage. In this way the preserved traditions are becoming again, a kind of symbolic public performance of ethnic identity and thus they acquire also new societal dimensions. Festivities themselves and used flags are seen already not only and not so much as an event connected to given occupation but as an expression of preservation and demonstration of community traditions, as a manifestation of their ethnic identity (as Roma in Prizren and Kyustendil, and as Balkan Egyptians in Resen). Moreover, not only guilds' flags, but the very name 'esnaf' in some cases can obtain ethnic meaning – e.g. in Macedonia in a number of places the Balkan Egyptians identify themselves also as 'Esnafs' (thus this term became kind of ethnonym); and in 1998 in Belgrade the migrants from Macedonia created an Association of Egyptians "Esnaf" (Marushiakova and Popov 2001; Marushiakova et al 2001). The celebrations with old esnafs flags are also one opportunity for the public demonstration of national civic identity. In Kyustendil together with guild banner is worn also the Bulgarian national flag and after Bulgaria's accession to the European Union also the EU flag. In Prizren, it can be used for demonstration of the preferred national identity, and the guild banner is worn together with Albanian and Kosovo national flags, and in some cases to both banners is added also the Turkish national flag, as an expression of preservation of historical traditions and continuity of the Ottoman Empire. Some Roma activists go even further, eg their read the Islamic calendar year written on the Prizren banner according to Christian calendar in order to prove antiquity of Roma presence in Balkan lands – it is interpreted that Roma became Muslims already in times of Sultan Saladin (i.e. in 12th century) and migrated together with the Ottoman Turks in the Balkans (Kruezi 2008). So ultimately the Gypsy guilds and their symbols do not disappear, but find under new forms a new life.

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Illustrations

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Meeting of Gypsy Musicians, Sofia, 1920



Esnaf Flag from Resen, Republic of Macedonia



Big Esnaf's Flag from Prizren, Kosovo



Small Esnaf's Flag from Prizren, Kosovo



The Grave of Baba Ymer, Kosovo



Esnaf's Flag from Kyustendil, Bulgaria



Hamalsko horo in Kyustendil, 60s of 20th c.



Celebration in Kyustendil



Celebration in Prizren