

Elena Marushiakova, Vesselin Popov  
University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK

**Letter from ‘One Egyptian’:  
First Historical Evidence of Aspirations for Civil Emancipation\***

**Abstract**

In 1867 in the Bulgarian newspaper *Macedonia*, printed in Istanbul, was published a reader’s letter, signed with the pseudonym “one Egyptian”. At that time, on the Balkans the name ‘Egyptians’ (*Γυφτοι*, *Egyuptsi*, *Gyupti*, etc. in the various Balkan languages) designated a community whose official name in Ottoman-Turkish was *Kıptı* or *Çingene*, and whose descendants today self-determine as Roma or Balkan Egyptians. This letter can be understood in the context of ongoing processes of national emancipation of the Balkan peoples, especially in the context of the struggles of the Bulgarian church community for exiting the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate, which was dominated by the Greek clergy. “One Egyptian” in his letter protests against the stereotypes about the “Egyptians”, which are reflected in the practice of the Orthodox Church, and advocates for the creation of “own” church, “own” language, “own” clergy and in perspective the creation of “own” education and “own society” (i.e. own country). In the proposed presentation will be analyzed the content of this Letter in general social and political context of the time and will be explained its main visionary ideas about the future of the communities that still live in the Balkans and identify themselves respectively as Roma or Balkan Egyptians. Along with this will be revealed the identity of the writer of the letter and his biography. The communities which are heirs of “one Egyptian” living today in his native town of Prilep (now in the Republic of Macedonia) and their historical consciousness will be presented as well.

When talking about Roma Civic Emancipation, it is logical to start with the first steps in this direction, and in this presentation we will introduce the first one from such visionaries. From a chronological point of view the first documentary evidence of the appearance of a new civic awareness among Roma and of their aspiration towards civil emancipation and equal status of their nation can be found in the 19th c. on the Balkans within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. At that time among the Balkan nations who were part of the Empire started movements for independence from the Empire with aim

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\* This presentation is part of the research project “RomaInterbellum. Roma Civic Emancipation between the Two World Wars” that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 694656). It reflects only the authors view and the Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

to form their own national states, and Roma did not remain aside from these processes and have their own specific place in these emancipatory struggles.

In 1867 in the Bulgarian newspaper *Macedonia*, printed in Istanbul, was published a reader's *Letter to the editor* (the chief editor was Petko Rachov Slaveykov, a renowned Bulgarian enlightener, fighter for civic and national revival and for independent Bulgarian church); the letter is signed with the pseudonym "One Egyptian" (One Egyptian 1867: 3). At that time, on the Balkans the name 'Egyptians' (*Γυφτοι, Egyuptsi, Gyupti*, etc. in the various Balkan languages) designated a community whose official name in Ottoman-Turkish was *Kıptı* (i.e. Copts - the native Egyptians) or *Çingene*, and whose descendants today self-determine as Roma and Balkan Egyptians.

Summing up the content of the letter from "One Egyptian" – it is directed against the Greeks as a whole, because according to the author they are to be blamed for the plight of Egyptians and are a major obstacle to their civic development. In particular, the letter opposes the overall management of the Orthodox Church in the conditions of Ottoman Empire by the Greek church elite. This elite was called "Phanariotes" from name of the neighborhood Phanar (modern Fener) in Istanbul, where resided court of the Patriarch and lived rich Greek merchants who influenced the Ottoman administration. The Greek church elite under the Ottoman system were recognized as both the spiritual and secular head of all the Orthodox subjects of the Empire (except those Orthodox under the spiritual care of the Patriarchs of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria). They are accused for not allowing other Orthodox nations in the empire, as it was in the case of Bulgarians, to have their own religious independence. To say it in the words of the letter discussed: "the Phanariotes govern our faith" and "only they have the right to it and only they are followers of the Apostles of Christ".

In his letter, "One Egyptian" is arguing that the policy of the Greek Church is detrimental to all nations, but affects most badly "the Egyptians", who are not allowed into the Orthodox Church. In the words of the author of the letter, the Egyptians "do not change exactly in all mysteries of the Orthodox faith", because they are suspected of being "semi-Christian and semi non-Christian in faith" and are considered by the Greeks to be "completely unpleasing to God" and "belongs to the savages - idolaters believing".

With many quotations from Holy Scripture the author of the letter argues that the Greeks have no reason for such an attitude towards "the Egyptians." Christianity does not divide different peoples to "chosen by God" and "unpleasant God," because all people are equal before God, including the "Egyptians" who are also entitled to have their own "spiritual education".

Greeks are further blamed that they consider only themselves to be "pleasant to God, and all others consider suspicious and unworthy", and that they insist that only their language is appropriate for worship and forget that: "the Apostles speak all languages through the Holy Ghost and not only the Hellenic".

The letter to the Editor is full of bile attacks against the Greeks: “But if you set to examine [them] about their affairs without others, you will find the very persecutors and destroyers of the faith and its rules making use of the beauty, simplicity and pure beauty of the other tribes, [they] use faith as a means of their wile and intrigue in order to stop time and keep it in a harness and slavery destroying all righteousness which was given from Our God Jesus Christ to everyone down under Heaven who believes in Him and is baptized in His name.”

According the Letter, the Egyptians in past, in their original motherland Egypt, had “reached a high degree [of] education [but] they did some disturbances in Egypt. From which some thousand [people] were displeased and moved to Hellas. There, in Hellas, they brought together with them their eternal arts and alphabet”. The Greeks themselves in the distant past were wild men, and “oafs and as we say were grazing grass [i.e. they are like animal, stupid and dumb]” and only “with the tireless attempts of the Egyptians to educate them they acquired a more tamed order”. The letter ends with an appeal to the Greeks, “If they want to be proud before Europe that they are enlighteners, let them first bow and prostrate themselves at our feet, to recognize their enlighteners and do their duty with which to show a faithful example for the others, and then they would have the right to ask.”

The author of the letter tries to identify “where our [i.e. Egyptians] moral sickness comes from” and detects it in the fact that “an Egyptian obeys two and three faiths at the same time”, for which, however, is to blame the Greek patriarch who “either from ignorance or from some peculiar whims and hostility that His Holiness felt for the Egyptians, and in his anger to punish them he forbade officiation”. Therefore “... an Egyptian ... being a Christian and seeing that he is not allowed into all the mysteries, and mostly that he is suspected by the other Christians, he resorts to another faith and yet preserves the primary one. And thus, the Egyptians being dispersed and being out of the frying pan and into the fire, and being in a terrible despair, they cannot make a society and take care of education”. The author of the letter used arguments to plead for the right of the Egyptians as an ancient people. He wrote: “we are a breed of the old Egyptians, which is proved live not only by our advantage and abilities, but by our very language and the appellation “Egyptians” which we still hear today”. Because of their glorious past they have right to have religious worship in their own language and to “create a society and taking care of education”.

This letter can be properly understood only in the context of social movement of Bulgarians during this period against the Greek Patriarchate in an effort to have “own” Bulgarian church. The newspaper “Macedonia” where the discussed Letter was published, was the main speaker of this movement and its editor in chief Petko Slaveykov was one of its leaders. For the author of the letter, ‘One Egyptian’, similarly as for the Bulgarian national revivalists, these “church” struggles, were religious only as a form, but in fact they were a movement for the protection the fundamental right of every nation to religious and respectively from here also to civil equality. The author feels disparaging

(in the best case) attitude towards Gypsies of the macro-society and suffers from restrictions imposed on his people by the Christian (and in general the religious) institutions of that time. In his Letter to the editor he shows the injustice of such an attitude both in terms of the essence of the Christian religion and in terms of the historical fate of individual nations. In defense of his theses about “historical right” of “Egyptians” to “create society and taking care of education” he uses the historical knowledge accessible to him. This is the article entitled “Циганите” [The Gypsies] written by Petko Slaveikov, published in newspaper “Gayda” in 1866 (Славейков 1866: 2-3), which actually inspired him to write his letter to the editor.

The content of the Letter to the Editor confirms once again what we know from other historical sources. In the Ottoman Empire the Gypsies were integrated into the social fabric with their own social and civil status, which was very similar to the status of other nations subjects of the Empire. Speaking about the times of Ottoman Empire we are using the English umbrella term ‘Gypsies’, because at that time the distinction between Roma and Balkan Egyptians did not exist and they were one community. So, the Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire were full-fledged subject of the Sultan, have had civil rights since the 15th c., unlike the Gypsies in Central and Western Europe who achieved this social status much later. That was why the development of the Gypsies, at least on the level of ideas, was very similar to the development of the other Balkan nations among who they lived. The letter shows that at least some members of the Gypsy community in the Balkans in the nineteenth century reach a new stage in the development of their community consciousness. This new stage is characterized by exiting the “internal” traditional frames of the community and seeking equal place in the new “external” socio-cultural realities, according the norms and values that lord over there. It is the Balkan context that determines the shape of this new public appearance of Gypsies – they like other Balkan nations, are searching actively for proofs of “glorious” historical past. They are questing for creation of a new national historical mythology that will serve them for support and argument in the struggles for their civil emancipation as a separate but equal to other Balkan nations community.

As a whole the logic of Gypsy community development, as seen in the Letter to the Editor is a repetition of the pattern of development of the other Balkan nations in the 19th c. in all its segments - creation of own system of education, own church with services in own language, and eventually, without especially mentioning it, the implied perspective of own state. Whether these ideas were altogether realistic in view of the situation of the Gypsy community on the Balkans back then is another question. However, the emergence of such ideas was a fact, which could not be ignored.

Finally the last question remains – who was the author of the Letter, who was the person who signs as “one Egyptian?” The letter impresses with his literature style, and especially with the high level of literacy of his author. From numerous references to theological literature and to the

publications in periodical press it is palpable that the “One Egyptian” was well educated for his time and especially for his midst.

The answer to the question “who was the One Egyptian” we found in the materials published by famous folklorist from the end of 19th century Marko Cepenkov. Describing existing guilds in town of Prilep (now in Republic Macedonia), he noted the existence of separate Gypsy guilds (of blacksmiths, violinist and porters) with their respective Patron Saints holidays (St. Athanasius and St. Anthony’s) and explains:

The reason behind all this is a Gypsy called Ilia Naumchev, a barber. This Naumchev, to him went more educated people in his barber shop and day by day he advanced and accepted his ethnicity and he was not ashamed to call himself an ‘Egyptian’, because, as he explained, the name came from Egypt. This Ilia hoped very much for a priest of Gypsy ethnicity. Many years have passed, but he still desired to have this rank among them and was tireless working among the Gypsies to fix them from drunkenness and all their bad behaviors. After he gained influence among the Gypsies he convinced the three guilds to celebrate St. Anthony’s day. 2-3 years ago he succeeded to become himself a priest in the holy Exarchate. (Цепенков 1898: 181)

With a sufficient dose of confidence may suggest that this Ilia Naumchev is the “One Egyptian”, who wrote the letter to the editor of the newspaper “Macedonia”. As it becomes clear from this note, his enlightenment activities among local Gypsies eventually were crowned with at least partial success.

As it is known however the independent Gypsy Orthodox Church for which he appealed was never created. The fights of Bulgarians for independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church was more successful and as a result in 1870 the Bulgarian Exarchate was created with Firman [decree] of Sultan Abdulaziz. It granted the right to establish an autonomous Bulgarian Exarchate for the dioceses of Bulgaria as well as those, wherein at least two thirds of Orthodox Christians were willing to join it. In the plebiscite in 1873 in town of Prilep more than two thirds of inhabitants of the city, including local Gypsies, declared their wish to belong to the Bulgarian Exarchate, which is another indirect proof of the impact of enlightenment activities of Ilia Naumchev among his people.

By irony of the fate but completely logically as result Ilia Naumchev in the mid of the 1890s received a post of an Orthodox priest in the Bulgarian Exarchate. In all likelihood his congregation covered the Gypsies in town of Prilep, and although he did not become a priest in an independent Gypsy church (for what he advocated in his letter), at least he was a priest serving a Gypsy community.

The latest historical evidence about Ilia Naumchev is from 1900, when he continued to be a priest in his native town of Prilep in Bulgarian Orthodox Church (Кънчов 1900: 115).

Unfortunately, its further fate after the adoption of the priesthood is not yet known and today in his hometown Prilep any memory about him disappeared among the local Gypsy community. And something more, the communities living today in his native town of Prilep which are heirs of “one Egyptian” are all Muslims and Protestants. One part of them are with Roma identity, others prefer to be “Balkan Egyptians” and from point of view of religion they still are considered to be “semi-believers” similarly to the times of Ilia Naumchev. Possibility of an independent Gypsy church appeared only much later with the penetration of evangelical churches among Roma in the Balkans, and nowadays in his native town Prilep they are quite a few Independent Gypsy churches, however they are not Orthodox, but Protestant. Yet it is already another story.

Anyway no doubt that Ilia Naumchev was one of the first champions of Gypsy civil emancipation, not only in Macedonia or on the Balkans, but globally.

In conclusion we would like to note that already the discussed first published text throw lights on the issue why the first Gypsy organizations in the first half of the 20th c. emerged exactly in Balkan countries. The Gypsies on aftermath of Ottoman Empire wanted to become equal citizens of the new ethnic and national states and of their social environment without losing the specific characteristics of their community. This was the main strategic goal of all Gypsy organizations, which were founded on the Balkans back then and even which are acting nowadays.

Already in the times of One Egyptian we are able to see some repeating pattern in the Roma movement, which are visible and relevant even today - striving to highlight the ancient and noble origin, stressing the need for education, demands for equality with preservation of own ethnicity and language. Along with this, already in this Letter became apparent one of the main weaknesses of the Roma movement which we are observing until now – the dependence from various “external” for their community factors that limits in fact its independent development.

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