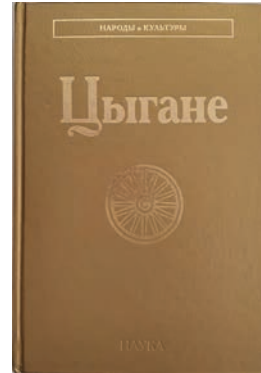


## REVIEW ESSAY

### THE ROMANI IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE, THE SOVIET UNION, AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

N. G. Demeter & A. V. Chernych (eds.). *Tsygane*.

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**Abstract:** The aim of this essay is to present a comprehensive review of the collective monograph *Tsygane* (The Romani), published in 2018 in the series *Narody i kul'tury* (Peoples and Cultures). The authors give an overview of the modern developments in Romani studies to acquaint the reader with the background of the reviewed monograph. Every chapter of the monograph is analyzed in detail, taking into account the most recently gathered ethnographic and folklore materials, such as the data recorded by Aleksandr Rusakov and Aleksandr Novik in Leningrad region and in the Balkans (Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Turkey) in the late 1980s and early 2000s–2010s, and the newest publications on the subject, such as a monograph by Evangelia Adamou and Yaron Matras on language contacts, published in 2021.

**Keywords:** ethnography, popular beliefs, review, Romani culture, Romani folklore, Romani languages, Romani of Eastern Europe, Romani of Russia, Romani studies

The collective monograph *Tsygane* (The Romani) was published in the academic series *Narody i kul'tury* (Peoples and Cultures), founded in 1992 (editor-in-chief V. A. Tishkov, executive secretary L. I. Missonova). It is a significant event for the ethnological Romani studies in Russia and, we are not afraid to say it, the whole of Europe. In Russia and other countries (first of all, France, the United Kingdom, Serbia, etc.), there are quite a few papers dedicated to separate Romani groups getting published every year (Stewart 2013; Oslon 2018), but most specialists focus on particular matters of language, cultural and social anthropology, sociology, etc., and, with very few exceptions (see, e.g., Tcherenkov & Laederlich 2004), no studies are published that would be dedicated to a wide complex of problems with a summarizing analysis of the entire thesaurus of ethnohistorical, ethnographical and folklore materials.

Every ethnologist doing research, in Europe or on any other continent, gains some knowledge about the Romani. Whether one studies a single region or ethnos or dedicates oneself to an anthropological topic from an objective 'super-ethnic' position, one would inevitably touch upon the Romani-related topics. With any ethnos or a social, confessional, or any other group, there would sooner or later be a question of their contacts with the Romani. Among the ethnogenetic legends, memorates, prejudices, xenonominations, etc., there would always be the question: who are they, the Romani (*tsygane*, *gypsies*, *jitanos*, *jevgjit*, etc.)? The aim of the collective monograph is to give a full answer to this difficult question.

The issue of the volume titled *The Romani* is therefore very important and timely. The group of authors led by editors-in-chief Nadezhda G. Demeter and Aleksander V. Chernykh were able to professionally display the wide palette of history, folklore, mythological and religious views, cultural diversity, language, and identity of the Romani of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, modern Russia, and other countries – the former Soviet republics as well as others (first of all, Poland, Hungary, Romania, etc.). The large volume of the publication (53.3 standard quires) has allowed them to include widely different topics traditional for the *Peoples and Cultures* series. The book, as a planned encompassing work on Romani ethnography, is informative, detailed, and highly sought-after in modern academic circles.<sup>1</sup>

The collective monograph (in total, 17 authors, both from Russia and from other countries, have taken part in writing it) is divided into 14 chapters, with an introduction, a glossary, and a highly informative row of illustrations, including a large colored inset (56 photographs). The monograph overviews various topics of history, languages and dialects, traditional culture, rituals, marriage traditions, folk beliefs and secret knowledge, calendar festivals, folklore, folk

art and professional culture, and modern ethnocultural processes in the post-Soviet space and abroad.

Concerning the methodological aspect, we should note the high level of use of field materials in almost every chapter of the book, which increases the quality of the research. The authors do not 'encode' their informants, as it has been common among Western anthropologists, instead giving their names, age, and place and time of data recording, which serves in favor of the reader's trust in the presented materials. The fieldwork dedicated to collecting data for the book has taken Nadezhda G. Demeter, Aleksandr V. Chernykh, and other members of the group of authors several decades. This is a guarantee of the quality and authenticity of both the field observations and their analysis.

However, in most collective monographs we find a regrettable dissonance in theoretical approaches, terminology, or study methods. In *The Romani*, despite the editors' careful work, such discrepancies are also present. For example, the approach to defining Romani groups in the time of their migration from the northwest regions of Hindustan: they are alternately called castes, caste groups, *jāti*, ethnic groups, etc. We are not talking about the Romani ethnogenesis in the first centuries AD, but rather about the situation and time when their groups began to move west from the area they had occupied before. Elena N. Uspenskaia, a well-known Russian Indologist, has suggested an Indian caste theory; the authors of the reviewed volume often cite her monograph which became the basis for a doctor habilitation dissertation, presented at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MAE RAS) in 2010 (p. 590). It is left unclear why they do not accept the established specialist's point of view:

*Castes did not exist in traditional Indian society. The caste (isolationist, segregation) social interaction between specialized clan structures has existed and still remains essential. The highest of said structures is jāti (Sanskrit: 'birth, origins, breed'); it has become the 'prototype' of caste, being the basic functional unit of the traditional Indian society and giving it the 'caste' features, making it segmented ... Jāti is typologically an analogue of the tribe, has an ethnic and social capacity, is an essential form of ethnic consolidation and the basic structural module of social organization in India. The diversity of jāti, ranged by status, forms the 'caste society' (traditional organization of jāti), having its own laws of structure, functioning and reproduction. The segregation-complementary way of social interaction between capsulated clan structures gives the characteristic caste nature to the traditional Indian society. (Uspenskaia 2010: 6–7)*

Turning back to the text of the reviewed book itself, we should enumerate the most important topics brought up in its historical, ethnological, folkloristic, linguistic, and ‘peri-linguistic’ chapters.

First of all, it is the highly significant question of *ethnic identity and self-identity* of the Romani (this chapter is written by major Bulgarian ethnographers Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov<sup>2</sup>). This conceptual and particularly important chapter (standing somewhat apart, in terms of methodology and style, from the rest of the book) brings up some details which are essential for the Romani as an ethnic society. In particular, we can point out that, as the authors justly remark, “an exact group’s identity reveals itself only when one group’s members meet other Romani groups” (p. 517), otherwise it only exists in a sort of latent form.

We also agree with the distinction – in the aspect of identity – between the Romani of Western Europe on the one hand and the Romani of Eastern, especially south-eastern Europe, on the other. In Western Europe, the Romani are more separate and marginalized (in addition, their population is smaller), and it has led to them mixing with other nomadic groups of non-Indian descent.

It should be noted that the authors are firm opponents of the constructivist approach to determining Romani identity, which is actively developed in Western anthropology. While we agree with some of their arguments, we have to remark that when it comes to the countries of south-eastern Europe, it is the constructivist approach that yields the best results: the groups which are originally Romani but have switched to their country’s dominant language (first of all, Albanian) identify as separate ethnic groups with their own history. Among such groups there are the Egyptians (Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro; they identify themselves as descendants of the Ancient Egyptians) and the Ashkali (Kosovo; they believe themselves to be descendants of Iranian settlers who moved to the Balkans in the fourth century, other legends of ethnogenesis are also recorded). Thus, it is interesting that the classic ‘primordialist’ signs – common origins, etc. – become important details of constructing ethnic identity.

Language is also a principal component of the Romani communities’ identity. However, various Romani groups have significant differences between them in that aspect. There are communities that have switched to the surrounding population’s languages but have preserved their ‘Romani identity’. Among the groups that retain their mother tongue, the latter can play different roles – from the linguistically dominant language to a subdominant one (the second possibility, as it seems, is characteristic of several groups of ‘the Russian Roma’). Finally, there are Romani dialects that have switched to the grammar of the neighboring population’s languages and are sociolinguistically similar to argot

(there seem to be no such dialects on the territory of Russia). Perhaps the collective monograph's chapters dedicated to the Romani language should have been slightly more detailed on the questions related to its sociolinguistic status.

Due to the very nature of the reviewed book, the problems related to the Romani language are in some measure on its periphery. Nevertheless, it should be noted that they are discussed succinctly and at a high academic level. The language is in the focus of a special chapter, "The Romani Language and Its Dialects", written by K. A. Kozhanov and V. V. Shapoval (both authors are eminent researchers of Russian Romani dialects). Furthermore, linguistic problematics is touched upon in the edition's other parts (section "Ethnogenesis and Early Ethnic History" in the chapter "Main Stages of Ethnic History" by G. N. Tsvetkov; section "The Identity of the Romani between West and East" in the chapter "Modern Ethnocultural Processes" by E. Marushiakova and V. Popov). A special section is dedicated to Romani-language fiction literature (I. Yu. Makhotina).

Russia is a unique country, in the sense that all four Romani dialectal macrogroups acknowledged in modern Romani studies are represented on its territory. The reviewed book contains a very informative survey of Romani dialects on the Russian territory, describing the larger dialect groups in more detail and enumerating the smaller ones. The survey is particularly valuable due to it being based on its authors' professional fieldwork (see, e.g., K. A. Kozhanov's paragraph on the dialect of the *Plashchuns* (плащуны) – the only group in Russia whose idiom belongs to the Central macrogroup of Romani dialects (p. 167)).

Over the last two decades, linguistic Romani studies have been undergoing intensive development. To understand the processes occurring in this research field, we need to turn to the history of studying the language of the people that have moved to Europe more than a thousand years ago.

Academic interest in the Romani language appeared in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century as a result of the introduction of comparative and historical linguistics. Practically during the entire nineteenth century, the Romani language has been studied by the most prominent linguists of the time, such as A. Pott, F. Miklosich, and G. I. Ascoli. In the first half of the twentieth century the situation changed (mostly due to the linguists' interest switching to the systematic study of language structure), and the research of the Romani language was mostly done by amateurs – some of the latter, however, were quite talented and achieved impressive results (see, e.g., the monumental study of the Welsh Romani dialect by J. Sampson, which has been the largest and most detailed description of a Romani dialect until recently (Sampson 1926)).

The return of professional linguists' interest to the Romani language started in the 1960s as linguistics turned towards anthropocentrism, in particular

when it became clear that bi- and multilingualism is the norm itself rather than a deviation from the norm. Naturally, the Romani dialects that have been influenced by languages of different typological structure and different genetic origins could not help but rouse intense interest in that regard. This led to the need to study these dialects using the methods and approaches of modern linguistics.

The rise in the quantity of studies led to the rise in the quality in the research in Romani studies. Among the many modern Romani researchers, we should name Yaron Matras (particularly, Matras 2002; Adamou & Matras 2021; etc.) and Norbert Boretzky (Boretzky & Iгла 2004; etc.), who can be considered the founders of modern linguistic Romani studies.

In Russia, the academic study of Romani dialects had its specific features. Apart from a small book by K. Patkanov (1887), the first academic papers on Romani studies appeared in the late 1920s – early 1930s (Barannikov 1934; Barannikov & Sergievskii 1938), which was related to the project of creating a standard Romani language. In 1938, that language was officially (though, of course, tacitly) forbidden, the result of which was a decrease of papers dedicated to the Romani language in general (with the exception of T. V. Venttsel's publications: Venttsel 1964, etc.).

The situation began to change on the brink of the 1970s and in the 1980s, with the publication of papers of noted Romani scholars, such as L. N. Cherenkov, V. G. Toropov, Lexa Manush (A. D. Belugin), V. V. Shapoval, etc. During the recent decades, they have been joined by K. A. Kozhanov and M. V. Oslon, the latter the author of a monograph on the Kalderash dialect, unique in its high academic level and detailedness (Oslon 2018). Undoubtedly, a special part in the development of Romani studies in Russia was played by L. N. Cherenkov (1936–2018) – an unmatched scholar of Romani dialects in Russia and in the world, the author of a fundamental ethnographic and linguistic survey of the European Romani (Tcherenkov & Laederlich 2004).

In the collective monograph, a separate section of the 'linguistic' chapter is dedicated to the literary Romani language, created at the end of the 1920s and, as mentioned above, liquidated as a project in 1938. During that period, about three hundred books had been published in Romani (sociopolitical literature, study books, fiction) and two social and literary journals were being issued, even if irregularly. That experiment, it seems, should rather be viewed as a failure: not just for the external reasons (it was quickly shut down!), but for the internal ones as well – a North Russian Romani dialect was chosen as a foundation for the standard language. This dialect, however, had been very strongly influenced by Russian, and the majority of the Roma population of the USSR could not understand it. When one of this review's authors, Aleksandr

Rusakov, worked on a field expedition among the Romani of Leningrad Oblast in the 1980s, he ascertained that the speakers of the North Russian dialect had no inkling of the existence of the literary Romani language and of the books that had been published in it.

Nevertheless, the literature published in the standard Romani language is a rich, if rather specific, source of language data. In the last few years, a linguistic corpus has been created that includes the majority of the texts published in that period. For example, the scans of Romani-language books are available on the site of the National Library of Finland (Fenno-Ugrica 2016), while the corpus of Soviet Romani texts with morphological tagging is available in the *Korpus tsynganskogo iazyka* (Corpus of the Romani Language) (Corpus 2020) (which is mentioned in *The Romani* on p. 168).

In the collective monograph, in the special section “Literature” of the chapter “Professional Culture”, the authors I. Yu. Makhotina and G. N. Tsvetkov make an overview of Romani-language fiction – both the books written in the 1930s in ‘literary’ Romani and the ones of more recent and modern authors that have been appearing since the 1960s and are written in various dialects of Russian Romani. They describe around twenty Romani writers. Some of these descriptions can rightfully be called complete essays on the writers’ creative work (see, for example, the essay dedicated to the classic of Russian Romani literature, A. V. German (pp. 475–476)).

Considerable attention in the book is given to the traditional crafts of the Romani. In the chapter “Trades and Crafts”, Nadezhda N. Demeter rightly notes that “over their one-thousand-year history, in all countries and at all times, the Romani have preserved the traditional activities they brought along from India (trade, acting, different handicrafts, fortune-telling, performances with trained animals, and beggary)” (p. 170). We should underline that all these activities can be traced starting from Byzantine written sources. “The unifying role, played, for example, by religion among the Jews, is given to traditional crafts among the Romani” (ibid.). Since their appearance in Byzantium, the Romani had been known as excellent metalworkers, settling down in entire metalworkers’ villages. Likewise, they were immediately famed for metalwork in Hungary, where they were given privileges. As they played an important role in the country’s defenses, King Matthias Corvinus made the Romani settlements exempt from taxes (p. 173). When the wide territories of the Carpathian-Balkan region were conquered by the Ottomans, the situation for the Romani did not change. According to Turkish sources, the Romani began to supply the Ottoman army with weapons and for that were made exempt from taxpaying again.

One of the ethnic groups of the Balkan Romani, living in Romania and the neighboring countries, is called Rudari or Lingurari. Their occupation was placer

mining for gold on riverbanks, leading to the origins of one of their ethnonyms (Rom., Serb. *ruda* ‘mine, digging pit’). The second ethnonym stems from the Romanian word *lingura* ‘spoon’. The reason is that in wintertime, when the rivers were frozen or too cold for placer mining, the Romani carved and sold spoons, ladles, spindles, and troughs (Vossen 1983: 145–146). When by the beginning of the nineteenth century the gold in the riverbeds had depleted, the spoon-making became their main profession. The Lingurari migrated in covered ox-driven wagons and carried everything necessary for woodwork with them: they produced troughs, tableware, spindles, etc. (p. 174). In eastern Serbia, the Rudari have preserved their distinctive character and a certain insularity up to the present day. For example, metalwork remains one of their occupations, as recorded by Aleksander Novik during expeditions in the Balkans (MAE Archive 2017).

The Romani have often retained such specializations until the present day. It is shown by our own results of archive research and field materials collected in 1990–2019. In the Balkans, the Romani population traditionally had the occupation of cleaning the streets and public spaces, which was permitted to them by the decrees of the Ottoman administration. Interestingly, in Albania the Balkan Egyptians made their living by cleaning streets both during the reign of King Ahmet Zogu (1928–1939) and during the communist period (for all that, during the building of socialism, it was declared that all the class and social barriers had been removed in the country and labor was promoted as the highest value!). The situation had not changed after the advance of democracy in the country in the 1990s, either. As our informants, interviewed by us during expeditions, told us, the leaders of Romani communities managed to make arrangements with the governments of the largest towns about establishing contracts for street cleaning (MAE Archive 2019). They were also responsible for garbage-sorting that brought them considerable additional profits.

Another Romani group from the western Balkans, called the Gabeli, mastered cottage industry as early as in the nineteenth century. Among their main occupations were basketwork, making of kitchenware, lamp shades, etc. The local population treated them with more respect than the Egyptians or members of other Romani groups (MAE Archive 2008). Starting from the 1930s, the Gabeli have mastered driving lorries. For example, among Albanian drivers (automobiles were, after 1944, mostly state-owned) many, if not the majority, of lorry and bus drivers were Gabeli Romani. Further on, starting from the 1960s, the situation changed, as the Albanians and representatives of other groups began driving actively as well. However, the ‘Romani occupations’ and specialization are well-known to the country’s population.

Informant: *I’m going to Durrës tomorrow, to meet an Egyptian. I want to buy a damaxhan from him, do you know what it is?*



A. N.: *Of course I know! It's a braiding for bottles.*

Inf.: *Yes, exactly! You know everything. And many among us have already forgotten what it is. I want to buy that damaxhan for a rakija bottle. I think that good rakija needs to be stored only in the proper bottle with a damaxhan, as they used to do before.*

A. N.: *But can't you buy one in a shop? Or is it too expensive?*

Inf.: *Why not? You can buy anything in some IKEA or other. But it's not the same! Everything's artificial. Or Chinese... And that Egyptian does everything properly, as it used to be in the old times. His work is not cheap, by the way, 20 euros for such a braiding. I have already paid him in advance, too. He has a queue of clients; everyone wants a good product. There are no masters at all left today.*

A. N.: *Is he an Egyptian or a Gabeli? The Gabeli used to do such things before.*

Inf.: *I know. But this one is an Egyptian. He works in Plepat, right under the bridge, just sits and braids there. He makes good money, by the way. A damaxhan doesn't take him all day, he manages to make many of them over a day. A business, in short.*

[The informant is an Albanian, 48 years old, resident of Tirana, businessman; the interview was recorded in Albanian in Tirana in September 2019] (MAE Archive 2019).

The business talents of the Gabeli are well-known in different regions of south-eastern Europe. For example, in the mid-1990s one of the authors of this review, Aleksander Novik, went, together with his colleagues, to a large, brightly lit store in Istanbul. After an exchange of long greeting formulas in Turkish, common for these situations, with the shopkeepers, the shop owner entered the hall to find out where the potential buyers were from. As he heard phrases in Russian exchanged among them and sized the possibility of good earnings (the Russians were always welcomed as clients), he ordered his employees, in Albanian, to bring traditional Turkish tea. It turned out the shop's personnel came from Kosovo. Quickly switching to Albanian, the guest made the hosts feel awkward; they were embarrassed and asked: "Je gabel? – Pse? – Sepse vetëm gabelët flasin në të gjitha gjuhët!" (Alb. "Are you a Gabeli Romani? – Why? – Because only the Gabeli speak all the languages!"). In the end, they never believed their visitor, deciding he was definitely a Balkan Romani, who was also hiding his origins. The light skin, European clothes and manners of the guest could not convince the hosts otherwise (while usually shopkeepers are excellent psychologists!) (FWMA 1995).

In the collective monograph, a relatively large chapter, "Folk Culture", is dedicated to folklore (I. Yu. Makhotina) and folk knowledge (I. Yu. Makhotina<sup>3</sup>,

O. A. Abramenko). For the *Peoples and Cultures* series such attention towards folk heritage is an agreeable exception (since most of the volumes are focused mainly on the ethnographic description of peoples). The section “Folklore”, consisting of subsections “The Genesis of Musico-Poetic Folklore of the Russian Romani” and “Folklore Prose and Phraseology of the Russian Romani”, is written by excellent specialists, which can be seen from the high-quality analysis of texts.

The authors’ whole study has a definite and detailed structure and is presented in a concentrated manner, which allows the reader to get acquainted with all the folklore genres. They do not only list the folklore texts recorded among the Romani, but also, in most cases, suggest the source of their origin or borrowing.

*Approximately since the 17th century folk poetry of the Russian Romani has been developing as a result of assimilation of the song culture of the surrounding ethnic group. Russian folk songs and romances have entered the Romani everyday culture, both from the repertoire of Romani choirs and through communicating with different groups of Russian society.*

*Despite considerable mutual influence, variety repertoire (for choirs) and everyday repertoire developed differently. The latter was more influenced by Russian peasant songs, which can be observed by the fact that they were mastered in their original shape and in paraphrases, in the Romani and mixed Russo-Romani languages (p. 394).*

The researchers who believed the music of the Russian Romani to be the most complex among the Romani cultures of Eastern Europe, connected the secondary role of the song lyrics with the ethnic group’s ‘musical focus’, which made the lyrics a sort of aesthetic improvisation (Shcherbakova 1984: 51; Druts & Gessler 1990: 152). The Romani interpretations of Russian songs or romances have a sociocultural nature: the interpretation that took root was the one that corresponded to the “ethnopsychology, values, realities of life, etc.” (p. 392). Thus, the Romani borrowed the well-developed image of the horse from ritual poetry (the establishment of modern authors’ songs in Romani folklore is recorded up to the present day). The male character often acquired the features of a horse-dealer (ibid.). For example, Pantelei, the hero of a song of the same name that stems from the folk interpretations of “The Quarrel”, an 1856 poem by I. S. Nikitin, became an unlucky horse-trader (Makhotina 2010: 86–95).

The authors also present conclusive proof of the origins of a narrative song “Dadivès” (Today), explaining the incoherence of its lyrics by the shortening of its source – a Russian robber song, which they cite from an eighteenth-century

source (Chulkov 1780: 169–170). I. Yu. Makhotina and O. A. Abramenko conclude:

*Though the recorded versions are separated by two hundred years, the contents of the Romani version correspond quite well with the plot of the original one; the extended beginning of the prototype is replaced by lines that are lexically close to the beginning of the soldier song “Во субботу, день ненастный” (On Saturday, a rainy day); the repetitions are shortened; the text is almost fully translated into Romani; many lines have parallels in the prototype’s text. (p. 400)*

The authors of the collective monograph managed to brilliantly interpret the folklore materials recorded among the Russian Romani (one can feel their many years of experience of dealing with the topic). However, when they turn to folk and similar plots, recorded by other researchers among the Romani of Western Europe, their writing has certain gaps present in it. Among them we can name the quick enumeration of healing and charm practices in the paragraph “Medicine” of the section “Folk Knowledge”, referring the reader mainly to the studies of the English Romani’s herbalism by T. Thompson<sup>4</sup> (p. 418); there is nothing more said about Thompson’s research of the Romani in the monograph.

The musical, singing and dancing culture is one of the chief markers of the Romani common identification and self-identification, regardless of where they live – in Eastern, Southern or Western Europe. In many regions playing musical instruments and singing are among the main sources of income for the Romani population. For example, in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, Romani musical ensembles are traditionally invited for weddings (Fig. 1), circumcision rituals, etc. Romani musicians walk around towns and villages, playing their instruments, during the main Muslim festivals – Eid al-Fitr (Alb. *Ramazan bajram*) and Eid al-Adha (Alb. *Kurban bajram*) (Fig. 2). By playing the drums, they announce the start of *iftar* (the breaking of the fast, the beginning of the evening meal, taken before or after the evening prayer) during the holy month of Ramazan (Fig. 3).

In the collective monograph, in the chapter “Professional Culture”, the substantial section “The Romani Choir as a Phenomenon of Russian Culture in the 18th–20th Centuries” is written by Ilona Yu. Makhotina, and the in-depth section “The Dance Traditions of Russian Romani” is written by the excellent specialist Marianna V. Smirnova-Seslavinskaya. In these sections the authors make a detailed analysis of the music, song, and dance culture of the Romani on the Russian territory, pointing out the fact that this field demonstrates mutual influence of various ethnic groups’ cultures. Until today, phenomena such as



**Figure 1 (above left).** A Romani musician playing at a wedding. Trebisht village, Golloborda, Albania. Photograph by Aleksandr Novik, September 2009.

**Figure 2 (above right).** A Romani boy playing the drum during the holy month of Ramazan. Tirana, Albania. Photograph by Aleksandr Novik, September 2008.

**Figure 3 (below).** A Romani musician, signaling the start of iftar in the holy month of Ramazan. Trebisht village, Golloborda, Albania. Photograph by Aleksander Novik, September 2008.

Romani choirs, Romani romances, Romani ensembles and Romani dancing have remained very popular on the whole territory of modern Russia.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter “Calendar Festivals and Rituals” (A. V. Chernykh, K. A. Kozhanov, G. N. Tsvetkov, I. Yu. Makhotina, Ya. A. Panchenko) could have been longer, considering the ethnological specificity of the entire *Peoples and Cultures* series. But the readers are presented with rather compressed information on the topic, segmented according to the respective Romani groups, with an obvious focus on the Orthodox Christian ones (which is explained by the fact that they form the majority in Russia). The authors mainly touch upon the rituals of the winter and spring cycles, whereby the celebration of New Year’s Day, decoration of the New Year tree, etc., are presented without any stipulation that it is a fairly recent tradition, starting only in the twentieth century and mostly spreading among the peoples of the USSR only in the period following the Great Patriotic War. In the entire collective monograph, there is little information on the Muslim Romani. In the chapter dedicated to the calendar rituals there is only one small paragraph about the traditions of the Crimean Romani.

The chapter “Family and Daily Family Life” (N. G. Demeter) is more detailed, but it also mainly deals with Orthodox Christian Romani. A study of the occurrences in the Muslims’ family ceremonial remains, as we must suppose, in the plans for further research. For example, among the rites of passage, important for anthropological descriptions, there is no mention of the rite of circumcision. This topic has generally been described to a very small extent and would have been highly relevant for such a multidisciplinary study.<sup>6</sup>

In general, the religious affiliation of the Romani and folk beliefs spread among them are given much attention in different sections of the monograph, as well as in a separate chapter titled “Religious and Mythological Beliefs” (A. V. Chernykh, K. A. Kozhanov). Extensive data, from both the archives and the field materials, are analyzed there. However, the authors never give a clear conclusion: the Romani mostly adopted the dominant ethnic group’s religion. Thus, in the Byzantine Empire the Romani were Christians, with the arrival of the Ottomans and the establishment of a five-hundred-year Turkish reign on the Balkans the Romani massively converted to Islam (the Turks as an ethnic group did not form a statistical majority in the local population’s structure, but being Muslims, they automatically belonged to referent groups of an enormous empire, having a direct bearing on various administrative resources). Unwilling to be pressed by the state, the Romani, who were heavily discriminated in the feudal society as it was, converted to Islam, wishing to free themselves from the huge taxes and other duties for non-Muslims, which existed during all the periods of the sultans’ reign. Likewise, in the Russian Empire the Romani adapted quickly in the religious aspect, adopting the faith of the Orthodox

majority. It is proved by the fact that the Romani groups who lived in Poland and were Catholic Christians quickly converted to Orthodoxy after moving to Russia (it is mentioned in the collective monograph on p. 364).

For the Romani it was important to retain their mythological ideas and their belief – if possible, we may call it the ‘Romani-ness’, or the ‘Romani soul’. Perhaps this is the reason why the authors of this review, asking various MA and PhD students (not even students at the BA level!) in the main universities of the country about the religious beliefs of the Romani, never get an answer that would be even near the truth. “They probably have some religion of their own!” is usually heard from the lecture hall. Considering this fact, the collective monograph *The Romani* is very relevant and necessary for modern society.

A book that presents itself as a full overview of Romani topics is difficult to imagine without a special section dedicated to gold in culture and mythological beliefs. In this volume, in the chapter “Religious and Mythological Beliefs”, in the section “Concepts of Luck in Romani Culture and Luck Talismans” the paragraph “Gold in Customs and Rite” (A. V. Chernykh, K. A. Kozhanov) is significantly present. Moreover, the design of the book itself – shiny gold text on the dim gold background of the cover – symbolizes the special role of the precious metal in the system of Romani traditional values. In the *Peoples and Cultures* series such an approach is clearly new (one can only recall the volume *The Jews*, which had its title written on the cover in both Russian and Hebrew (Emelyanenko & Nosenko-Shtein 2018)). Gold, as the paragraph’s authors rightly remark, served as a store of value, a means of increase of wealth, a measure of values and a mythologized precious metal, firmly ingrained in the beliefs and culture of the Romani (pp. 381–385). This metal has been playing this part until today; the majority of the Romani population on the vast territories of the former Russian Empire / Soviet Union and modern Russian Federation prefer gold as a store of value to all currencies and other assets. Likewise, the authors suggest correctly that the origins of such a hypertrophic treatment of gold are to be found on the territory of Hindustan, from which the Romani have come. (We should add that it was among the Indians that the gold had been the measure of values for millennia – in contrast to, for example, China, where silver was the main payment equivalent and store of value, and gold was merely an item of goods, its price changing depending on the situation at the market). But the influence of the system of values formed in Byzantium and later in the Ottoman Empire was no less important and evident. The Oriental passion for luxury and demonstration of wealth, common to the referent groups of states that followed each other in south-eastern Europe and Asia Minor, influenced the Romani no less strongly than the traditions brought over from India.

To conclude, we would like to note that the book is supplied with many high-quality illustrations which allow one to see the world of Romani culture in its entire richness and diversity. The photographic illustrations (from archives and museums, from family albums, pictures taken by the authors A. Chernykh, D. Vayman, etc., on expeditions over many years) enrich the book exceptionally and make it informative and valuable.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A review of the book in question has already been published by Ivan Duminika, a researcher from Moldova: (Duminika 2020). In our study we have tried to highlight important topics that have not been analyzed in his review.
- <sup>2</sup> Both researchers currently working at the University of St Andrews, United Kingdom.
- <sup>3</sup> In the table of contents, it is erroneously noted that one of the authors of the sections is I. Yu. Matyukhina rather than I. Yu. Makhotina.
- <sup>4</sup> See Thompson 1925: 159–172.
- <sup>5</sup> On carnival culture and European carnivals, where the Romani or people dressed as Romani also participate, see the comprehensive work by Testa (2021).
- <sup>6</sup> On circumcision among the Balkan Muslims see Novik & Rezvan 2019: 119–134.

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