

## **Narrative and Mission Praxis: The Roma in Europe**

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In 2017, I visited a settlement in Serbia of about 5,000 Roma.<sup>1</sup> Like many other Roma communities in Eastern Europe, this settlement is immediately adjacent to the main town, which consists of primarily Serbian residents. Within the Roma community, there is a small Pentecostal church begun twelve years ago by a Roma man and his wife. On this occasion, the pastor invited me for coffee, wanting to discuss an issue with me. He told me his frustrations with various organizations coming in and handing out food or money. In his perspective, these organizations were trying to “prove” that God takes care of the poor, but actually they were *siju prosjake*, or “sowing beggars.” Likely these organizations or churches had been motivated to action by the story of the poor and marginalized Roma in Europe; however, he saw how this kind of mission work, without the context of proper relationship or knowledge, was creating divisions and jealousies among churches and individuals. He and his wife had a small business, buying and selling produce in the town’s open market, and in his view, a mature faith involved trusting God for provision rather than becoming dependent on others. Perhaps this was also motivated by his own disappointment – promises of financial help from one Western organization which had never completely materialized.

In the last few years, interest in the Roma in Europe as a potential mission field has grown in places like the United States, motivated in part by increased awareness due to media images as well as academic and popular research. This reality raises the question of connection between narrative and praxis, particularly in the context of working in vulnerable and marginalized communities. What narratives are being told *about* the Roma in the context of mission work, and who is telling them? How are Roma Christians themselves telling their narrative, and do they have the access to do so? How does this narrative-telling matter affect cross-cultural relationships and partnerships?

### **Historical Narratives**

In fact, this question of narrative has contributed to divergent historical interpretations of the Roma history in Europe: who controls the narrative, and what kind of epistemology is guiding the interpretation?<sup>2</sup> Much of early Romani history in Europe is speculative or spotty; part of the historical complexity lies in the fact that the early history is gleaned from outsider perspectives on the Roma, pieced together with very few written accounts from the Roma themselves. However, many scholars agree that over 1000 years ago, groups of people who would later identify as Romani left northwest India and migrated to Anatolia and the Balkans, later spreading all over Europe (Taylor 2014:20). The complex relationship between Romani

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Roma” was adopted for public discourse in 1989, but not all groups refer to themselves by it, although outsiders might. Romani people are often thought as an ethnic group with their own language, while Gypsies may be Romani or a related ethnic group including Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Gitano, Dom, Lom, etc. I mainly use Roma in this article because “gypsy” (with a small-case “g”) can be a derogatory term in some contexts, although in other contexts “Gypsy” (with a capital “G”) is how they refer to themselves, and I do occasionally also use this to denote a wider population.

<sup>2</sup> For example, it is interesting to reflect on the difference of historiography from a scientific racism paradigm in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to more social constructionist frameworks (Matras 2015; Selling 2018; Lucassen et al. 1998).

groups and other European populations has sometimes been mutually beneficial and positive. However, in more recent centuries, government and state entities often tried to force the Roma into mainstream society. These strategies included forced assimilation, slavery, banishment, and a culmination of genocide during WWII (Matras 2015; Taylor 2014; Achim 2004).

Today, the majority of the ten to twelve million Roma and Gypsy communities in Europe often have higher rates of unemployment, illiteracy, health issues, and lack of adequate housing than other populations in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe. In addition, they often face social exclusion, discrimination, and anti-Gypsyism – defined as a specific type of racism against Roma, Sinti, Travellers and those referred to as Gypsies that is deeply rooted in historical images which created stereotypes based in fear and hatred (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018:11). In fact, images of the “gypsy” through history have often been polarized between a poor, criminal underclass and a romantic, free wanderer, both one-dimensional caricatures based on stereotypes.

Roma history in Europe has often been reduced to the simplest narrative. However, the narrative is much more complicated than that. Indeed, it should be considered as *narratives* that are all interweaving with each other to form a complex picture. In fact, the “Roma” are far from a monolithic group in terms of identity, socio-economic status, and culture. In terms of identity, there are groups who may identify themselves as Romani, Gypsy, Gitano, Travellers, or Sinti, but sometimes policies or outside entities morph everyone into the name “Roma,” even if that is not what they call themselves. In addition, although many Roma do have higher rates of poverty than the majority population, not all Roma are poor and marginalized. In fact, there are Roma at every layer of society. Consequently, it is a misnomer to refer to “Roma culture” or the “Roma way,” all the while assuming that ten million people could fit neatly into a certain essentialized package.

### **Christianity among the Roma**

Likewise, the story of Christianity among the Roma can be oversimplified. For example, sometimes in mission publications a single narrative is told about Gypsy revival. In fact, to learn about Christianity among the Roma requires viewing it as multiple narratives, interweaving in specific contexts that are intertwined with their respective complex histories and current socio-cultural settings. In addition, although Christianity has been spreading through Roma communities for decades – the most prominent form being Pentecostalism – that growth is a profoundly under-researched topic of study (Thurfjell and Marsh 2014).

In the 1950’s and 1960’s the rapid growth of a “Gypsy Revival” began first in France and then Spain, and continued into numerous countries and across different Roma groups. Christianity among the Roma in Eastern Europe also was present in Roma communities earlier in the twentieth century, with Pentecostalism spreading rapidly in Bulgaria, Romania, and Central Europe after the fall of Communism. In the last 25 years Christianity among the Roma began in smaller forms in Southeastern Europe, the most prominent being a revival in Southern Serbia which started a church planting movement throughout Serbia (Wachsmuth 2017). Although accurate numbers are difficult to obtain, enough research has been done to know that the numbers of Roma Christians are significant and growing. Today there are thousands of Roma churches, Roma Bible Schools, seminaries and training programs, missionaries, and Christian organizations.

### **Which narrative(s) are framing mission?**

This tapestry of narratives, set against both mission history in general and Roma history in Europe, is important to reflect on in terms of reading, writing, researching, or doing mission work among the Roma. The lens of interpretation, both of the history and the current situation, influences the missional approach. A singular, overly simplistic narrative about the Roma leads to an overly simplistic “mission strategy.” Too often, stories rely only on disturbing pictures of Roma children picking through garbage dumps or beggars on Europe’s urban streets. Although these images are true, to rely on only these kinds of images creates Christianity’s own “one-dimensional” humans and imprisons the Roma as objects instead of recognizing them as the active subjects in God’s mission. This can lead to unintentional paternalism, “benevolent god playing” or eventual frustration that “they just won’t act like they are supposed to (Crouch 2013; Myers 2011).

Within NGOs, state initiatives, and EU measures, there is now a sentiment from the Roma that “nothing about us without us” to indicate that countless measures taken *for* the Roma or done *to* the Roma without the Roma having a significant voice in the process is, at least theoretically, over.<sup>3</sup> This sentiment should provoke critical reflection within the mission community toward the Roma as well. Often, well-intentioned mission initiatives are merely manifestations of Western neo-liberal development ideas. Certainly, there can be some helpful theoretical and practical perspectives in such a paradigm. However, applied uncritically they can be lightly camouflaged strategies to assimilate Roma to “our ways.” Moreover, they can fail to take into account a biblical theology of human flourishing.

Questions I have raised in other articles – including what human flourishing looks like in a specific Roma context, in relationship to the majority cultures as well as modern European society – obviously need to be addressed first by Roma Christians and then in conversation with other Christians partnering with them (Wachsmuth 2017a; 2017b). Related is the equally important question of narrative: who controls the narrative of how Roma communities are portrayed to other Christians? Does the narrative lead to a multi-dimensional understanding of the Roma as subjects in God’s mission or reduce them only to poverty stricken beggars? When guests arrive and take pictures of Roma communities, I have sometimes heard Roma raise such questions as, “Are they using us to raise money for themselves? Or, are we zoo animals?”

Many Roma Christian leaders in various countries believe this is a critical time to focus on evangelization and discipleship of the Roma – and their vision often extends to holistic transformation of their communities. Some have the view that it is not just because the “harvest is ready” but also because they believe Roma Christians have a unique part to play in the spiritual revitalization of Europe in general. In the past, the Church too often believed the narrative that the Roma were irreligious, flaky, or not actually capable to lead themselves (Acton 2014, 27-28) – and sadly this narrative still exists among some Christians in Europe. Consequently, mistakes from mission history continue to be repeated by those who do not first ask, listen, and seek to understand a specific Roma context. Wider avenues must be created for Roma Christians to share their perspectives as well as the story of what God is doing in their communities. Sharing those perspectives and narratives provides a particular access to power that is often overlooked. At one conference in 2016, a Roma pastor asked the question, “Who has the right to name us?” In a similar vein, we must ask, “Who has the right to tell someone’s story, and why are we telling the story are we telling?”

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: <https://romanipe.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/international-roma-day-nothing-about-us-without-us/>; <http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us-roma-participation-in-policy-making-and-knowledge-production>.

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