Reclaiming Folk in Discourses about Music. Kotel Roma's Strategies against Antigypsyism

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Currently a research associate at CERLIS, Camilla Salvatore obtained her PhD in Sociolinguistics and Anthropology as part of a joint supervision project between Paris Cité University (supervisor Cécile Canut) and Charles University in Prague (supervisor Yasar Abu Ghosh). In her thesis, she analysed the discursive processes through which Romani inhabitants of Kotel (Bulgaria) site themselves in relation to official discourse that presents the town as a "model of living together" for various groups.

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Abstract

This article analyses how Romani residents of Kotel, a small Bulgarian town presented by its municipality as a "model of [..] Roma integration" (Kotelnews 2022) challenges essentialist narratives that are rooted in antigypsyism. In particular, I observe how some of my interlocutors reappropriate the Bulgarian adjectives "*chisto*" (clean/pure) and "*authentichno*" (authentic) – used in the communist past to describe what was constructed as "*narodna muzika*" (folk music) – to talk about their musical practices. I explore how they site themselves in relation to the established contemporary discourse of "integration" and to the society in which they live but are not always considered as totally belonging. Through the analysis of a corpus consisting of video excerpts and tape recordings collected during fieldwork, I argue that Kotel Roma claim their place in Bulgarian society as active contributors to the transmission and development of culture, not so much by reproducing the ideology of "purity" and "authenticity" but rather by using tools that a plurality of musical styles and genres can provide.

Keywords

- Antigypsyism
- Bulgarian Roma
- Music
- Performance
- Reappropriation

Introduction: Antigypsyism – A Matter of Shared Beliefs

Antigypsyism,[1] Antitsiganism (Piasere 2015), or Romaphobia[2] (McGarry 2017) is a social phenomenon and an ideology (Kruszelnicka 2018) that has been extensively discussed and analysed by scholars, activists, and social workers, especially in terms of appropriate terminology. It is agreed that it is a "specific type of racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and those who are labelled as 'Gypsy'"[3] (Alliance against Antigypsyism 2016,[4] 3) based on essentialised narratives and misrepresentations. In his book *L'Antitsiganismo*, Piasere (2015), underscoring that socio-cultural beliefs are antecedents to antigypsyist attitudes, observed that "Antigypsyism fights against Gypsies but in order to fight against them, it must have previously invented them" (Piasere 2015, 11, author's own translation). Indeed, how is it possible to express prejudice and violence against someone without having identified them? It is primarily a matter of naming, defining, and identifying who is "Gypsy" and to whom.

For centuries Roma have been defined as the "quintessential other" (Silverman 2012) in both Western and Eastern Europe and in the Americas. Theories of their origin from India were developed by scholars, many of them non-Roma who joined the Gypsy Lore Society (1888), based on historical and linguistic analysis of their migration route and language. Their aim was to explain some missing points in Roma's history, but these theories "[…] have often been reduced from historical narrative to a source of stereotypes about India projected onto Roma" (Lemon 2000, 84). By locating their "homeland" far to the east and explaining their "peculiarities" as remnants of their Eastern origins, scholars have "orientalized" (Said 1978) Roma and created stereotypes that, perceived as positives or negatives, have influenced relations between Roma and non-Roma. Indeed, the assumption that Roma are thieves, unwilling to work, dependent on welfare, lack their own culture, and so on fuels and justifies *Tsiganofobia* (Piasere 2015), while *Tsiganofilia* (Piasere 2015) is based on the assumption that Roma are free nomadic spirits, sensual dancers, and excellent musicians. Both these attitudes result from the entailment of a series of processes such as generalisation, essentialisation, and categorisation (Canut et al. 2019) in which Roma are not considered as individual subjects but rather as a homogeneous whole where every difference is erased (Gal and Irvine 2019). How do Roma themselves respond to stereotypification? In this article, I will attempt to answer this question by exploring how discourses on musicality and music genres, if voiced by Roma themselves – though reproducing essentialist stereotypes created by non-Roma – can also deconstruct these same representations by means of

1 For further references, see Knudsen 2005; Wippermann 2005; Nicolae 2006; Piasere 2010; 2011; 2015.

2 The author defines it as follows: "Romaphobia is a system of structural inequalities and prejudicial attitudes and signifies a historical process created and recreated through practices (McGarry 2017, 93).

3 In this article I will use the term Roma as chosen by the representatives of the IRU (International Romani Union). However, I will switch to the term "*Tsigani*" ("Gypsy") instead of Roma when reporting on other people's speech. Indeed, in Bulgaria the word "*Tsigani*" is used in everyday discourse by Bulgarian non-Roma mostly with negative or neutral connotations. However, the term "*Tsigani*" can also be used by Bulgarian Roma to identify themselves and to express personal claims, such as above, in the title's quotation. For instance, Katerina, a Romani woman from Kotel, told me "Well, I am a Gypsy, it is not a problem for me to say that I am a Gypsy" (field notes, May 2022). It could be argued that in this way she not only re-signified (Butler 2006) the term but also manifested her pride rather than shame.

4 Available at https://antigypsyism.eu.

reappropriation and resignification. This entails "transcend[ing] historically constructed stereotypes about Roma and attend[ing] closely to the self-representations of Roma themselves" (Fremlova 2022, 2). I will draw on the discourses of Romani residents of Kotel, a small town in the eastern Stara Planina (Balkan Mountains) in Bulgaria, which is promoted by its municipality as "a successful model for partnership and an example of Roma integration into society" (Kotelnews 2022).

1. Summary

First, I will briefly describe the phenomenon of the construction of social *personae* (Bakhtin 1981) of the *Tsiganin* (Bulgarian[5] for "Gypsy") in post-1989 Bulgaria. Second, I will analyse how this phenomenon manifests itself in Kotel, a town where different groups seem to coexist harmoniously. In particular, I will observe how the *Kotlenski Tsigani* ("Gypsies from Kotel") – in their daily interactions and also on stage during the "Festival of the Ethnicities, Colours, and Kotel Carpet"[6] – re-employ the label of *Muzikanti* (musicians) to perform their self-presentation in front of non-Roma, including myself. This is done by reproducing a contrast with 'other' Roma to whom negative stereotypes are attached and then self-identifying with the positive ones of *dobri* (good) and *kulturni* (educated). I will argue that, despite the fact that Kotel Roma are also portrayed as such by their non-Romani neighbours, prejudices still subtly affect their relationships and daily interactions. My point is to observe how some Roma in Kotel enact a "performance [that] depend on metadiscourse about them" (Lemon 2000, 93) and to explore whether they are able to construct counter-narratives. Drawing on previous research on Roma's self-presentation (Tremlett 2012; Silverman 2012; 2020; Fremlova 2022) and wishing to provide new insights on this process, based on fieldwork data and analysis, I will argue that some of my interlocutors – reappropriating (Silverman 2012) the adjectives "*chisto*" (pure/clean) and *"autentichno*" (authentic) to describe their language,[7] music, and form of *bit*[8] (being) – challenge an essentialist narrative on Bulgarian folk which is rooted in communist policies and ideologies about "*narodna muzika*" (folk music). Indeed, Romani musicians – creating a new artistic material by combining different musical styles (Bulgarian, Roma, and Turkish music, contemporary jazz and pop) and still labelling it "*narodna muzika*" – are claiming recognition by underlying their role in the preservation, circulation, and transformation of this genre. In this endeavour, I attempt to foresee an opportunity for Roma to produce their own self-representation by re-appropriating meta-discourses on art and culture previously produced by non-Roma.

5 Almost all the terms in italics are in Bulgarian, their English translation given in parentheses. When the term in italic is not Bulgarian, its origin and translation are indicated.

6 The festival has been going since the summer of 2016. However, for its first two occasions – the second organised in cooperation with an NGOs from Sofia where I volunteered as part of an EVS (European Voluntary Service) project – its name was simply "Festival of Kotel Carpet", and its objective was to show tourists and visitors the richness and variety of Kotel handmade carpets. It was only in 2018, when the organisation was again handed over to the local municipality, that the word "ethnicities" and a new scope, that of creating a "bridge" between them, were added.

7 In Kotel the majority of my interlocutors referred to their linguistic practices as "*Tsiganski*" ("Gypsy"). However, when engaged in conversation in institutional settings, some of them shifted to the term "*Romski*" ("Romani").

8 For uses of the term, see also Lemon (2000).

2. Methodology

This article is based on selected interviews (six of a total of thirty) made during several fieldwork sessions. The aim is to observe the sociolinguistic processes – a definition is given in the footnotes – through which Romani residents of Kotel perform their self-representation. This includes their interactions with strangers, such as with me, as well as their performances at concerts and festivals. Additionally, it seeks to identify the strategies that Kotel Roma employ in response to antigypsyist attitudes that, despite the town's reputation as a "model" (Kotelnews 2022), still affect relations among residents. To this end, I employ a critical (Heller 2002) and political (Canut et al. 2019) sociolinguistic approach. This means considering how words relate to the context of the interaction and to the broader social context where it takes place, the interlocutors' positions and the influence of discourses and categorisations that, being socially shared, are "already there" (Canut et al. 2016, author's own translation).

3. The Construction of 'Tsigani'. Historical Background and Contemporary Narratives

To gain insight into the construction of the social *personae* (Bakhtin 1981) of the so-called *"Tsigani"* ("Gypsies") in Bulgaria, it is necessary to provide a brief historical overview. From 1948 to 1989 Bulgaria was under communist rule. During this period, the state authorities implemented special measures for the assimilation of the so-called "minorities" (Stoyanova 2017). These measures encompassed the recognition of each *natsia* (nation) and *natsionalnost* (nationalities/ethnicities) but eventually progressed to their assimilation. Indeed, during the initial period of the communist regime (1948–1956), state authorities recognised that the languages, traditions, and folklore of Armenians, Jews, Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims who retained the Bulgarian language), Roma, and Turks needed to be preserved, and children were therefore instructed in their native language (Marushiakova and Popov 2017). However, in the second period of the regime (1956–1989), these groups were compelled to become an "indistinguishable part of the Bulgarian population" (Zhivko, cited in Marushiakova and Popov 2004), and any difference was erased: It was forbidden to speak a so-called "mother tongue" in institutions and in public, Muslim names were changed to Bulgarian, the wearing of *shalvari* (loose pyjama-like trousers worn by Bulgarian Muslims, Muslim Roma, and Turks) was banned and "nomadic" people were forced to settle (Stoyanova 2017). Roma were a particular target of this policy. They were led to settle in the rapidly industrialising urban centres or in rural areas where they worked in agricultural cooperatives and were encouraged to become active contributors to the construction of a supposedly 'equal' society. Some educated Roma, such as Gospodin Kolev and Shakir Pashov, active members of the Communist Party and advocates for the "enlightenment of the Gypsy tribe" (Pashov 1957, 5), defended this ideology. Additionally, during this period, true "ideological work" (Gal and Irvine 2019) was carried out in the field of culture. Specific institutions, both political and academic,[9] had the role of "direct[ing] and control[ling] musical creativity,

9 Some of the most important ones were the KK *(Komitet za Kultura)*, the TDNT (Tsentralen Dom na Narodno Tvorchestvo) – affiliated to the BKP *(Bŭlgarska Komunichestva Partiya)* – the Institutes of Musicology and Folklore and the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore Studies within the IEFSEM *(Institut za etnologiya i folkloristica)* – both affiliated to BAN, the Bulgarian Academy of Science *(Bŭlgarska Akademya na Naukite)*.

performance, education and research" (Buchanan 2006, 160) at the state level, while the *chitalishta* (public reading centres) directed cultural life in every town and village. The goal of the Communist Party was to reinterpret traditions as "one of the instruments of the state [...] organised, embellished and purified village forms and practices were returned to the people as a symbol of national pride" (Rice 1994, 28). This would help create "a future style of Bulgarian musical and dance folklore […] in a new type of stage presentation for the audience" (Krŭstev 1986, cited in Buchanan 2006, 142). This reconstructed reality implied a radical contradiction to what was presented on stage as "*authentichno*" and "*chisto*" and was rather the result of a threefold process of "westernisation, standardisation and rationalisation" (Peicheva 2008, 96) of village dances and tunes. Indeed, "village music of the Slavs was reaffirmed as authentic folk music, to the exclusion of urban music and the music of minorities" (Silverman 2021, 28). It was exactly at this period that schools for the teaching of "Bulgarian music and folklore" were opened. The oldest and most renowned ones were in Shiroka Lŭka in the Rodhope Mountains and in Kotel in the Stara Planina or Balkan Mountains.

Following the collapse of socialism and the transition from a state-run economy to free market in 1989, social differences and inequalities reappeared or, more accurately, became more visible. The privatisation of state-owned factories and agricultural cooperatives resulted in the unemployment of numerous low-skilled workers, predominantly Roma. These workers were compelled to seek alternative sources of income through the informal economy, social benefits, and migration to Western Europe and the Americas. According to my interlocutors, from the *gastarbeiteri* (guest workers) it was mainly Roma who returned to Bulgaria after a few months to build new houses for their relatives, while most non-Romani Bulgarians never came back. This phenomenon is interpreted by many non-Roma as a sign of *tsiganizatsiya* ("Gypsification"), a xenophobic term used to warn against a perceived "invasion" and "degradation" of Bulgaria by the so-called "*Tsigani*"[10] in all areas of social life – including music. This narrative is fed by a sense of threat that is rooted in Romaphobia (McGarry 2017) and instrumentalised by far-right parties, such as *Ataka* (Attack) who fuel their rhetoric of hatred and racism with slogans such as "*Ne iskam da zhiveiya vav tsiganska derzhava*" (I don't want to live in a country of Gypsies). This discourse reflects the phenomenon of "ethnicisation – or racialization – of poverty" (Canut 2016; Van Baar 2017), a process by which social phenomena, such as poverty and marginalisation, are explained through the lens of a supposed "race" or "ethnicity". Indeed in Bulgaria – a country that, according to recent ERRC reports, is violating human rights by not providing equal access to health system and demolishing "illegal" houses in so-called "Gypsy neighbourhoods[11] – some persons, no matter if they are Roma or not, are labelled as "*Tsigani*" because of a set of characteristics that are considered as signs[12] of 'Gypsiness': they appear as *cherni* (dark) – in contrast to the majority as *byali* (white) – as

10 In this regard, McGarry (2017) noticed that "Gypsy" term has changed in meaning, it is still pejorative and oppressive but nowadays carries with it "a sense of threat" (*Ibid*., 101).

11 See https://www.errc.org/news/bulgarian-helsinki-committee-condemns-illegal-mass-demolition-of-romani-homes-as-a-blatant-violation-of-basic-human-rights).

12 Here the socio-linguistic phenomenon of enregisterment (Agha 2004; 2005; 2007) is at work. It consists of "a social regularity of recognition whereby linguistic (and accompanying nonlinguistic) signs come to be recognised as indexing pragmatic features of interpersonal role (persona) and relationship" (Agha 2005, 57).

well as *mrazni* (dirty), *loshi* (bad), and *ne gramotni* (illiterate) because they allegedly speak Bulgarian on a very basic level with a peculiar accent and they listen to and play *chalga.*[13]

4. Constructing Kotel as a 'Model Town' through Discursive Practices.

Antigypsyism however is not expressed openly everywhere in Bulgaria. In the small town of Kotel the coexistence among various "ethnic groups" such as Bulgarians, Karakachans, Roma, and Turks,[14] seems to be peaceful and harmonious. The main reason for this, according to some residents, is that Roma in Kotel are *po dobre* (better): they are educated, their children attend school, they do not steal, they are Christians believers (mostly evangelical), and they work with other groups in the municipal offices, in social centres for children, and at NUFI (National School for Folkloric Art). To gain further insight into how Kotel Roma are described by their non-Romani neighbours, I will rely on fieldwork interviews.[15] One of my interlocutors, Valeria,[16] who lives near the *dolna mahala* (lower neighbourhood) or *Muzikanskata mahala* (musicians' neighbourhood) spoke to me as follows:

1. VAL <((softer voice))> in kotel (.)gypsies are respected (.)gypsies are totally different from the other (.)villages
2. CAM yes (.) they are FAMOUS
3. VAL YES (.) because they are musicians (.) and they dress: like bulgarians (.) they are already included in our society
4. CAM (.) has it ALWAYS been like this\
5. VAL yES(.) i have been here forty-five years (.) i was married in kotel (.) i live here yes and when i arrived (.) i am from merava
6. CAM yes i remember
7. VAL yes <((softer voice))> there the gypsies are (.)<((softer voice))> dirty:: bad <((laugh))> they steal (.) and here (.) totally different (.) still when i came here (.) these years (.) before forty-five years

13 The word *chalga* comes from Ottoman Turkish where its original meaning was simply instrumental music (Peicheva 1999; Buchanan 2006; Seeman 2012; Silverman 2012). After 1989, its meaning shifted since in Bulgaria *chalga* is associated with a negative connotation to Roma music. Technically, *chalga* could be defined as "a pan-Balkan fusion of Romani, folk, and popular music (Silverman 2012, 19). For more detailed information regarding the debate surrounding *chalga,* see Peicheva 1999; Levy 2002; Rice 2002; Silverman 2012.

14 The Turks living in Kotel and in the surrounding villages are mainly *kazalbashi* (Turkish k*izilbaiş,* redhead), as they are called by non-members of the community. They are considered unorthodox Muslim because their celebrations are not held in mosques, music is performed, and there is no separation among men and women. Since the word *kazalbashi* could be regarded as offensive, the terms *Alevi, Aliani* (worshippers of Ali), or heterodox Muslims are preferred in scholarly discourse.

15 All the selected interviews (six of a sample of thirty) were conducted in Bulgarian. The transcriptions follow the ICOR system (https://icar.cnrs.fr/ecole_thematique/tranal_i/documents/Mosaic/ICAR_Conventions_ICOR.pdf).

16 In order to respect their privacy, all names of persons and places have been anonymised.

(.) here they lived with the gypsies (.)here isn't it (.) they are musicians (.) they seem more like this (.) they are included in the society (.) they dress well yes <((laughs))>

(Valeria, Kotel, summer 2022, author's own translation from Bulgarian)

Valeria argued that Kotel Roma "are respected" (line 1) because they are" totally different" (line 1) from other villages or towns. This is because they master the profession of "musicians" (line 3 and 7), they "dress: like Bulgarians" (line 3), and "they are already included in the Bulgarian society (line 3). Note the use of the deictic "here" (line 5) as opposed to "there" (line 7) to mark the difference with Roma living in Gradets, her hometown, who, according to her, are "dirty", "bad", and "steal" (line 7). In Valeria's speech various processes of categorisation (Canut et al. 2019) and differentiation (Gal and Irvine 2019) can be remarked. First, she lumped together Kotel Roma under the "professions" (Marushiakova and Popov 2014) of *Muzikanti,* despite the fact that some are not working as such. Then she recorded (Agha 2005; 2007) Kotel Roma. This means, she assigned them a given 'social type' because of recognisable signs that are supposed to be vital to it: "They are better because they are musicians, and they dress well" (line 3), for dress code and profession are visible signs of *kulturnost* (being cultivated). Conversely, she recorded Roma from Gradets by attributing them supposedly "quintessential" Roma qualities of "dirtiness" and "badness" and the negative attribute of "stealing". In doing so, she reiterated the cultured/ not cultured contrast between the two groups in a process of "fractal recursivity"[17] (Gal and Irvine 2019). Indeed, in common discourse non-Romani Bulgarians often differentiate themselves from Roma on the basis of a level of *kulturnost* (being cultured) that Roma are supposed to lack: this entails having a job, being educated at school, being properly dressed, and speaking Bulgarian properly, without mistakes or accent (for a similar dynamic but in a different context, see Telep 2019). In her speech, Valeria reproduced this contrast but changed the pole of comparisons: Kotel Roma are the "cultured" ones, in opposition to Roma from Straldzha. The result is that, although Valeria's aim was to present Kotel Roma in a positive light and the city as an example of *razbirateltsvo* (understanding),[18] she tacitly alluded to some assumptions and prejudices – both negative and positive – about so-called "*Tsigani*".

As mentioned above, Kotel is renowned for its affiliation with NUFI Filip Kutev. Founded during the communist period, the school currently maintains a significant presence on the national stage, with its performances frequently broadcast on BNT (Bulgarian National Television). The school is attended mainly by non-Romani students, but during my fieldwork I was able to observe that in recent years some Romani students enrolled and also some Roma were employed *as korepetitori.*[19] This might have led the director to present a false picture: The school as an example of *razbirateltsvo* (understanding).

17 As illustrated by Gal and Irvine (2019), "fractal recursivity" consists of reproducing the contrast between two poles of a given dichotomy by situating it on different scale level, that is reproducing it on one side of the axis of differentiation by individuating new poles but leaving the contrast unaltered.

18 For an ethnographic account of a similar situation in Eastern Slovakia, see Ort 2022.

19 Répétiteur player. Musicians that play musical backing at dance performances.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of Katya, a former vocal instructor, a clear separation remains:

1. KAT oh the gypsies NO
2. CAM ah (.) why
3. KAT only: humm
4. CAM listening
5. KAT yes (.) listening
6. CAM why according to you\
7. KAT because they are: (0.2) they are (.) they are(0.4) aah (.) yes (.) they don't want to study
8. CAM aah:: ((embarrassed)) why\
9. KAT (0.4) other (.) oother: (.) oother:: humm… (.) nature (.) other nature
10. CAM and what nature (.) of what [kind]\
11. KAT [nature](0.2)humm… how to say it (.) they are lazy
12. CAM why\
13. KAT (0.2)humm (.)bulgarians yes (.) bulgarians yes they are the first but (0.2) after the bulgarians (.) karakachani
14. CAM and also the [gypsies]\
15. KAT nOoo…the gypsies NO/
16. CAM why\
17. KAT oh i don't (0.2)i don't like them

(Katiya, Kotel, May 2022, author's own translation)

Katiya reproduced an established hierarchy – according to which those so-called 'ethnic' Bulgarians are at the top and Roma at the bottom by saying that "Bulgarians, yes, they are the first " (line 13). Then come Karakachans and Turks, dancers with a good sense of rhythm, and "the Gypsies NO" (line 1; 15) because, according to her, their nature is "other" (line 9), and they are "lazy" (line 11). This passage illustrates how Katya enacted an antigypsyist stance by interdiscursively echoing a discourse that validates stereotypes and prejudices about Roma, especially that of "laziness". Indeed, Katya's – through the process of 'othering' – not only differentiated her students on the basis of a supposed "nature" (line 9) but also justified the exclusion of the so-called "*Tsigani*" (line 1) from the students she valued because they are good also at studying written music and not only learning it by listening. This attitude still pervades in Kotel, despite the narrative of "integration". Indeed, when asked about the relationship between Roma and non-Roma in Kotel there, Sara, a former colleague who is Roma herself, revealed to me:

1. CAM ((tell me)) about the life here in kotel (.) because i know that here everyone lives together and i think that they live well(.) what is your: experience (.) what is your: point of view\

2. SAR well ((to a colleague)) close please (.) well:: YES they live together (.)they work together but:: still bulgarians (.) they stay away a little from (.) roma (.) well:: with you they speak well:: this and that (.) but later:: they speak differently (.) do you understand \
3. CAM hum hum
4. SAR they have (0.4) ah (.) how to say it\ (.) they have respect towards (.) towards themselves (.)they have disregard (0.2) disregard for them
5. CAM h (0.2) disregard i don't know what it is
6. SAR disregard is (0.2) hey (.) this gypsy <((grimace of disdain))>
7. CAM hm <((nodding))> but not everyone
8. SAR well to you they say not everyone but in any case, it is like this
9. CAM hum hum: ok
10. SAR, they eat (.) they drink with you they laugh (.)they sit they drink coffee they speak (.) but still they have something in their minds

(Sara, Kotel, May 2022, author's own translation)

After some hesitation, Sara explained that, despite the fact that in Kotel people live and work together, "still the Bulgarians stay a little away from Roma" (line 2) because "they have disregard towards them" (line 4). When asked about the meaning of this term, Sara responded with an expression that is significant in itself: "Hey (.) this Gypsy" (line 6) accompanied by a grimace that conveys a sense of disdain.[20] Finally, in response to my attempt to specify that not everyone is like this, she simply stated that: "Well, to you they say not everyone, but it still is like this" (line 8). The "but" (line 10) explains a situation in which appearances are negated by the state of things: prejudices in Kotel become manifest in attitudes that, despite outward appearances, continue to keep Roma apart. Indeed, after a few months of fieldwork, remembering that racism can also be covert (McGarry 2017; Parsons Dick and Wirtz 2011), I observed that in Kotel antigypsyism is not only covert but also intra-visible, since it is only possible to detect it after spending an extended period there and building interpersonal relationship with both Romani and non-Romani residents. Indeed, after a few months, I noticed that, although the non-Romani residents outwardly conform to the official discourse of Roma "inclusion" in Bulgarian society, they do not interact with Roma in their private lives and still harbour prejudices against them. This attitude is also evident in some of the graffiti on the public walls which, although partially erased, is still legible: "Kotel *na bŭlgarite*" (Kotel for Bulgarians) and "*smŭrt na Tsigani*te" (Death to Gypsies).

20 Notice here a two-level indexicality (Silverstein 2003) through which a visual (the expression on the face) and linguistic sign (the use of the term "Gypsy") are employed to describe a discriminatory attitude.

5. Performing Romaniness/'Gypsiness'. Between 'Authenticity' and Creativity.

I will now examine how Kotel Roma respond to stereotypes by reappropriating but also challenging categories used by non-Romani Bulgarians. Indeed, many Kotel Roma with whom I spoke adopted the category of "*Muzikanti*" to describe themselves but, unlike non-Roma, also gave me historical reasons for this self-identification. Anthropological and sociological studies (Kenrick 1968; Kazalarska 2006) report that the first Roma arrived in Kotel at the end of the nineteenth century: They worked mainly as wool-spinners, filling a niche in the local traditional activity of carpet making, traders and musicians, as well as an economic niche. Indeed, it was precisely during this period that "a new type of urban Gypsy music appeared in Bulgarian lands, with a modern repertoire" (Marushiakova and Popov 2001, 66). Kotel Roma, mainly employed in urban ensembles and brass bands, left the profession of itinerant musicians and settled permanently in the region. Soon, the profession of *muzikanti* and some peculiarities in the music played – such as the '*staccato*' in clarinet solos, the "exact and correct performance" (Peicheva 1999, 90) when compared with the style of Romani musicians from other regions – became a mark of difference for Kotel Roma. This is what Kiro, the organiser of the stand *Tsigansko Katyn* ("Gypsy Camp") or *Romsko selo* ("Romani village") at the "Festival of Ethnicities, Colours and Kotel Carpets", explained to me:

1.1.1.1.KIR in kotel (.) in kotel a long :: time(.) ago(.) already huh humm(.) at the time of :: the second world war (.) when the russians passed through(.)here(.) huh hum :: hum (.) they had wind instruments (.) and somehow they were absorbed by our (.) huh (.) gypsies here (.) and they started to (.) to use (.) they started to know these instruments
2. CAM only wind \
3. KIR wind and moderns <((a woman sings))>
4. CAM and maybe percussion
5. KIR AH NO NO NO
6. CAM no\
7. KIR at the time there were none yet (.) there was *tapan*
8. CAM hum hum:: yes yes
9. KIR *baraban*
10. CAM yes yes *tapan (.) baraban*
11. KUR and that's it
12. CAM yes
13. KIR and since it started here(.) hum:: then music was introduced hum… (.) music in kotel (.) and this music already (.) hundred years / ss-started to:: b-become a profession and a way of (.) of life
14. CAM and education[.] isn't it that there are roma in kotel [who deal with] music and what are the others: : traditional (.) occupations\

15. KIR YES YES YES (.) there are (.) different categories:: hum (.) of gypsies in kotel (.)i mean:: some deal with wood processing: because of *balkana*[21] (.) the mountain [.] and they collect :: wild berries(.) and (.) herbs with which they feed themselves
16. CAM and mushrooms \
17. KIR YES (.) most of the people (.) deal with (.) with business (.) with (.) commerce(.) also isn't it[.] businessmen(.) mostly(.) they are musicians(.) BUT(.) every hum (.) caste if we can say that(.) we {live:
18. CAM together\]
19. KIR yes

(Kiro, Kotel, July 2022, author's own translation)

Kiro told me that during the Second World War, when Russia's army arrived in Bulgaria, music "was introduced in Kotel" (line 13) and became a profession and a "way of life" (line 13). Indeed, it was at this historical conjuncture that the Bulgarian brass band acquired 'modern' (line 4) – here used as a synonym for western – wind instruments and integrated them with local percussion such as the *tŭpan*[22] (line 7) or *baraban*[23] (line 9). Then, prompted by my question about other "traditional occupations" (line 14), Kiro employed the term "category" (line 15) to distinguish between the *muzikanti* (musicians) – a professional niche mastered by Roma since the time of the Ottoman Empire – and the dŭrvari (wood cutters) who collect wood, herbs, and wild berries in the forest. The line of differentiation between these groups is marked by two radically different ways of making a living, one associated with physical work and the other with performance. However, this line does not prevent contact since "every caste (.) uh if we can say we live" (line 17) – on my suggestion – "together" (line 18). In this conversation, Kiro, as other interlocutors met during fieldwork, differentiated Kotel Roma from "other" Roma – contextually identified with Roma living in other neighbourhoods, villages, and towns – and referred to the profession as one of the criteria for marking the difference.

In winter 2021, while traveling on a minibus from Sliven to Kotel, two Romani men from Kotel and Gradets approached my partner and I began to talk about musical genres, expressing pride in the fact that numerous Romani residents of Kotel are professional *muzikanti* who, while listening and playing folk music (field notes, January 2022),[24] tend to preserve the "authentic" folklore of the region while the younger generations prefer *chalga,* a musical genre often associated with the so-called "*Tsigani*" and regarded as a "degradation" of Bulgarian music.

21 Ottoman Turkish for "mountain".

22 Large double-headed drum that is played with mallets commonly used in the Middle East and the Balkans.

23 Another term used in Bulgarian for describing a drum set.

24 Unfortunately, on this occasion I did not have the opportunity to record. I am thus relying on my field notes.

At this point, it is necessary to contextualise their argument by recalling that, during the communist period, another genre – called *svatbarska muzika*[25] – was banned from the radio, television and public concerts by state authorities because it did not meet the criteria of "*chista*" and "*authentichna*". However, as Silverman (2012; 2021) showed in detail, *svatbarska muzika,* though considered "kitsch" by intellectuals, soon achieved great success as a counterculture phenomenon: Ivo Papazov, from Kardzhali, leader of the famous *Trakya* orchestra, became known worldwide, while clarinettists Mladen Malakov and Orlin Pamukov, from Kotel, were nationally known stars of the genre. With the fall of communism, a new genre – called *chalga* – emerged and reflected the ideals of capitalism and consumerism – while being also largely associated with the mafia. In contrast, wedding music became ironically associated with "folk". Indeed, as Silverman (2021) observed: "…in the last fifteen years, there are indications that wedding music is making a significant comeback; it is attracting larger audiences in Bulgaria and is being marked as folk genre" (*Ibid.*, 106). The two men on the minibus, by reproducing the contrast between "authentic" and "inauthentic" Bulgarian music on different scales – in a process of "fractal recursivity" (Gal and Irvine 2019) – reappropriated the communist narrative of musical "purity" and "authenticity" in order to assert their difference from 'other' Roma. Similarly, Michi one of the performers at the *Tsigansko katyn* ("Gypsy camp") – the Roma stand at the festival – told me:

1. MIC in kotel the school has been set up (0.3) near (.)the gypsy neighbourhood so that the students learn (0.2) from (.) the gypsies folk music [.] this means from the SOURCE [.] because this is as if you learn *jazz* from the negros[cfr.] and not to learn it *jazz* to learn *jazz* for example where (.) somewhere where there is no tradition of *jazz*
2. CAM yes…yes (.) you learn DIRECTLY from
3. MIC directly from the SOURCE and kotel (.) is typical (.) MOSTLY they like bulgarian folk (.) they DON'T like GYPSY music that much they like (.) to play (0.2) bulgarian music (.) and this means that bulgarian music (0.2) is (.) preserved by the gypsies (.) if (.) tomorrow (.) you say (.) <((gesturing away with his hands))> all the gypsies <((gesturing away))> no[
4. CAM no music]
5. MIC there will be no music (.) folk music

(Michi, Sofia, December 2023, author's own translation)

According to Michi, the NUFI school is near the *dolna mahala* "so that the students learn (0.2) from (.) the Gypsies (.) folk music" (line 1) which means "from the SOURCE" (line 1; 3). In a process of

25 As Silverman (2007; 2021) illustrates, *svadbarska muzika* (wedding music) "is defined by a combination of instrumentation, repertoire, context and style" (Silverman 2007, 70) where Bulgarian rhythms such as *pravo horo* (2/4), *rachenitsa* (7/16, 2-2-3), and *lezno* (7/8, 3-2-2) are combined with Romani rhythms such as *kyuchek* and modern instruments such as clarinet, saxophone, and drums are used for jazz-style improvisations". For a definition of *kyucheck,* see note 31.

"fractal recursivity" (Irvine and Gal 2019), Michi reappropriated the term *izvor* (source), used in folklorists' discourses about *chista* and *authentichna muzika,* but employed it to describe the music played by Kotel Roma. Then he resignified (Butler 1997) the word "negros" (cfr.) to compare Black people's mastery of jazz with Roma's mastery of folk. Indeed, it has been observed that the situation of Roma in Europe is comparable to that of Blacks in the USA (see Lemon 2000; Lie 2021): Both are marginalised and racialized, but are celebrated for their musical abilities, via a paradoxical attitude from the majority. Moreover, according to Michi, Kotel Roma like and preserve folk music to such an extent that, if one day all Roma were expelled from Bulgaria, there would be no folk music left. Michi's argument, though historically wrong, is rhetorically convincing. Indeed, through the reappropriation of the essentialised narrative of 'naturally gifted musicians',[26] he is able to claim Roma's role in the transmission of so-called "Bulgarian folk" and challenge an antigypsyism narrative aiming at "purifying" it of Romani and Turkish influences.

At this point, it is necessary to ask ourselves to what extent claiming "purity" and "authenticity" is effective in countering antigypsyism since such a discourse also may reproduce the same ideologies on which this attitude is based. I will show that other strategies are developed by disinventing[27] musical "authenticity" to create something new and artistic that is still rooted in 'folk' music but also creatively reinvents it. This means, deconstructing the idea of a homogeneous and "pure" music by stating its "polylingualism" (Peicheva 1995) and recognising the role that minority groups had in the transmission and transformation of particular genres. Indeed, music like language is the result of a combination of heterogeneous practices and styles resulting from the encounter and exchange among people in different historical conjunctures. The following section illustrates two examples of these practices, drawing on interviews made during my last fieldwork (July 2023). One summer afternoon, I had an enlightening discussion with Carlo, a trumpet player, and Ivo, a piano and synthesizer player:

1. CAM isn't it (.) and this [referring to the music played on the background by other musicians] this how is it called as:(.)music style
2. IVO what do you mean (.)by STYLE \
3. CAM yes(.)isn't it folk but with MODERN instruments \
4. IVO it is still folk music
5. CAM hum: hum
6. IVO there there are no: this::
7. CAM folk music (.) classical music and (.) and folk music
8. IVO GENRE (.)jazz and folk (.)here it doesn't matter what the instruments are (.) it is still folk music (.)well one music is performed with *kaval gaida* and *gŭdulka*

26 We can see here a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1999).

27 I refer here to the approach taken by Makoni and Pennycock (2007) in their work on "disinventing and reconstructing languages". I argue that a similar approach can be applied to music, considered as a semiotic practice.

9. CAM yes (.) just because I (.) i spoke with someone and [.] someone told me (.) no no (.) in theory this is not folk music because it is not with :: instruments which are:: hum: *gaida:: kaval:*
10. IVO and what is it\ IT IS NOT TRUE NO
11. CAM YES/ there are different
12. CAR folk music is played with clarinet (.) with accordion with:
13. CAM YES YES
14. CAR hum (.) violins
15. CAM this is not:: from the instruments (.) this is simply hum
16. CAR yes (.) from the genre [.] and classical you can play (.) and everything
17. CAM hum hum
18. CAR the fact that (.) hum (.) it doesn't matter which instruments are used(.) it could be *gaida* and play classical (.) it could be hum (.) accordion and play again (.) *kyuchek* and other different genres of music (.)this is not::
19. CAM: mostly you experiment with something don't you \
20. CAR nothing (.) since it is an instrument you can use with every music style (.) do you understand\
21. CAM hum hum
22. CAR with the trumpet i can play classical (.) and i can play folk:::

(Carlo and Ivo, Kotel, July 2023, author's own translation)

From the outset of the conversation, I sought to direct the discussion towards the concept of "authenticity". After inquiring about their musical style, I was informed that it was *narodna,* which translates to "folk" and is associated with "traditional" music. I then attempted to adopt the perspective of numerous non-Romani Bulgarians who argue that "authentic" traditional music can only be performed with traditional instruments like the *gaida* (bagpipe), *kaval* (chromatic end-blown flute), *gŭdulka* (vertically held fiddle), and *tambura* (plucked lute). However, they suddenly challenged me by expressing the idea that it does not matter which instruments are used, but the genre is the focal point (line 16). They provided examples from their own lives and works where they combine various musical styles and genres and perform 'traditional' Bulgarian music with 'Western' instruments, including trumpet, clarinet, drums, and accordion. Their argument was that "since it is an instrument, you can use it with any music style" (line 20), even *narodna muzika* (lit. folk music). I then spoke with Jimmy, who also plays the synthesizer, and he told me:

1. CAM and as style (.) what style do you play \
2. JIM well (.) to tell you the truth (.)i am the only person who (.) created his own style (.) and almost half of those who are (.) piano players (0.5) play (.) my style
3. CAM and how is it (0.2) this style \
4. JIM a style that (.)they don't know it (.) style (.) immy style (.) jimmy style

5. CAM yes (.) but if you have to:: how can i understand how it is\
6. JIM in which sense (.) well there is (.) it's on YouTube (.)all the young ones (.) copy me (.) my style
7. CAM yes yes (.) but to say (.) is it something like this\ <((gesturing to the music in the background))>
8. JIM yes *rachenitsi:: hora:*: (.) EVERYTHING (.) *kyuchtesi*
9. CAM and this (.) simply (.) you mix (.) a little…
10. JIM yes i mix (.) this is called (0.2)balkan music
11. CAM yes (.) balkan means:: what does it mean\
12. JIM the balkans this is (.) greece:: hum
13. CAM serbia:: bulgaria::
14. JIM turkish we mix:: many things (.) many (.) styles (.) many nations in one place (.) and so you have (.) balkan music
15. CAM yes (.) very interesting that::
16. JIM yes

(Jimmy, Kotel, July 2023, author's own translation)

Jimmy not only said, like the other musicians, that he combined a variety of styles and genres, but also claimed that he is the only one that has created his own style (line 2). This is "Jimmy's style" and via YouTube (line 6) is accessible to everyone, especially the younger generations who emulate it. This music includes Bulgarian dance rhythms, such as *rŭchenitsa* (line 8) and other *hora* (dances), as well as *kyuchek*[28] (line 8) and Turkish elements (line 14). To describe it, Jimmy employed a term previously used by other musicians: "Balkan" (lines 10 and 14). He provided an explanation by naming some countries located in the Balkan peninsula and saying: "many things, many styles, many nations in one place, this is Balkan music" (line 14). This statement interdiscursively reproduced a multiculturalist discourse that is increasingly exploited in the contemporary musical scene and market (see Silverman 2015) and in politics: it is also overstated by Kotel municipality to promote the summer "Festival of Ethnicities, Colours and Kotel Carpets".

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore how Roma in Kotel challenge essentialist narratives produced by non-Roma, which are at the root of antigypsyism. The initial section highlighted that antigypsyism is a social process whereby discrimination is enacted and justified on the basis of sociolinguistic processes such as categorisation, stereotypification, and recording (Agha 2004; 2005; 2007; Telep 2019). To address this, it is necessary to deconstruct the socially shared beliefs that underpin it. One of the strategies employed by Kotel Roma is to reappropriate (Silverman 2012) terms and expressions used by non-Romani Bulgarians

28 *Kyucheck* is a "rhythm characterised by a sequence in 2/4 and 9/8 (2-2-2-3)" and "a genre associated with Roma and Turks accompanied by solo dancing utilising torso isolations" (Silverman 2007, 7; see also Silverman 2012).

to exclusively define "*narodna muzika*" as essentially Bulgarian and therefore non-Turkish and non-Roma. I illustrated that, in a process of "fractal recursivity" (Gal and Irvine 2019), Kotel Roma musicians use the terms of "*authentichno*" (authentic), "*chista*" (pure/clean) and "*izvor*" (source) to describe musical performances where they put together elements of jazz, pop, Turkish and Romani *kyuchek,* and Bulgarian rhythms. Employing reflexivity (Silverstein 1993; Lemon 2000; Canut et al. 2019) and engaging in meta-discourses on performance (Silverman 2012; Lemon, 2000), they are challenging the established narrative about the "authenticity" of Bulgarian music and claiming their ability to preserve but also reinterpret it by easily switching from one genre to another, including Western, Balkan, and Romani music. In so doing, they are able to produce their own self-representation, a fundamental step in challenging antigypsyism.

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