

Identity and Integration: Jewish and Roma Diasporas in Post-Soviet Georgia

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Despite evidence of the existence of Jewish communities in the Republic of Georgia as early as the sixth century B.C., and historical accounts of Roma in the Caucasus by the 1700s, there are relatively few formal ethnographic accounts of either group within Georgia (Dymshits, 1999, p.118-119 and *The Georgian Times*). There are a number of reasons for the relative scarcity of ethnographic information regarding Jews and Roma in Georgia; among these issues is an antiquated model of diasporic studies that has only recently begun to change. Traditionally, ethnographic studies of diasporas have taken into considerable account the geographical and/or temporal "homeland" of the given diaspora; and while it may be true that diasporas generally do share a common geographical or historical homeland – and, indeed, the definition of their cultural identity must imply that commonalities found among members of the same culture are homological, rather than analogical, and are derived from some shared cultural ancestry – it is not always possible to define the geographical or temporal boundaries of such a homeland. Jewish and Roma diasporas represent two classic examples of this phenomenon.

The Roma and Jewish diasporas are two groups that do not fit the general model of a diaspora as proposed by many ethnographers. Though it may be suggested, according to genetic evidence, that the Roma are descended from a culture that existed in India several centuries ago – and the Jewish diaspora have recently reclaimed their homeland in the State of Israel - both of these groups have, throughout history, been better understood as cultures that do not have a homeland (Marushiakova and Vesselin, 2001; Blady, 2000). The identities of both the Roma and Jews are heavily dependent upon their global, transitory natures. This deeply rooted trans-national identity only serves to further

complicate their study as diasporas, especially given that these cultures have existed throughout the world as largely marginalized and oppressed groups. This is especially true in areas where it is already difficult to study diasporas; particularly in places where national conflict and upheaval have produced tense ethnic relations, as in former Soviet states within the Caucasus, where attempts to fully discuss the character of Jewish communities have historically been problematic:

“The anthropological and ethnological study of [the USSR] naturally poses many problems, the main ones being: 1) how to treat a majority nationality which inhabits a particular region, while having minority settlements elsewhere in the Caucasus; 2) how to treat a group which forms nowhere a majority, but which may be more numerous in one of the political or geographic subdivisions; and 3) how to treat a minority group which may be more numerous elsewhere in the USSR, but which has lived in the Caucasus for many centuries and has been able to evolve a specifically Caucasus culture.” (Emanuel Salgaller, *A Note on the Jews of Soviet Georgia [Gruzia].*)

Though these problems have been formulated to address Jewish studies in the USSR in particular, they likewise apply to any ethnic diaspora in former Soviet Republics and elsewhere. The Roma and Jews, in particular, pose unique methodological problems because they have not historically constituted the majority ethnic group in any of the regions they have inhabited (with the very recent exception of Jews in Israel). Though there are cohesive cultural elements common to virtually all Roma and Jews, these elements assume distinct variations throughout the world. For example, Jewish culture in Russia is very different from Jewish culture in the United States; and Roma culture in Scandinavia is very different from Roma culture in Canada. The most complete assessment of these groups as diasporas must consider both regional

peculiarities and global context, which is further complicated by the fact that there is essentially no standard – as they have existed outside of an ancestral “homeland” for many centuries – upon which to base these cultures.

There are, however, a few particularly beneficial cultural characteristics unique to these groups. This includes the shared practice of endogamy, which helps to minimize the complications that arise when considering the amount of non-native influence found among these cultures. Since neither Jews nor Roma have traditionally married outside of their cultural group, their fundamental traditions have gone largely unaffected by external forces and therefore have not changed much despite centuries of migration. This also facilitates attempts to trace migration patterns through genetic research. Such research is critical for Roma studies in particular, as there have been very few reliable historical records on their culture and migration (Marushiakova and Vesselin, 2001).

It is possible, by comparing and contrasting the experiences of Roma and Jewish communities in Georgia, to establish some fundamental framework for understanding their identities and degrees of integration within society. This works particularly well in places where the Roma and Jews have had *differing* experiences. We have already observed some of their similarities. By assessing their contrasting experiences in a single geographical and historical region – in this case we will consider the Roma and Jewish diasporas of Georgia, which have not previously been extensively studied – we may be able to understand how these cultures exist, adapt, and are marginalized or integrated on a larger scale.

The Georgian Roma

The classification of Roma diaspora is notoriously problematic, but is necessary to establish when using the term “Roma.” Literature on the Romani frequently treat the diaspora as an inclusive social status applicable not only to

ethnic Roma, but also to other so-called “Gypsy” peoples. Even among anthropologists, there is widespread disagreement on whether the Roma constitute a purely cultural phenomenon – which can logically include any racial or ethnic group that shares the distinctly Roma lifestyle, language, kinship reckonings, values, religion, traditions and socio-economic status; or whether they are a racially cohesive peoples with common ancestral roots and migration patterns, as evidenced by genetic markers; or if they are both ethnically and racially defined, borrowing some degree of identity from shared traditions *and* shared ancestry.

As is customary in discussions of this nature, general anthropological discourse on the Roma most often favors the third option, splitting the debate of biology versus culture (e.g., nature versus nurture) into a clean 50/50 compromise. This acknowledges that the Roma may have some long-forgotten ancestral homeland, and are indeed genetically more similar to one another than they are to outsiders, but are also linked by a set of cultural peculiarities that interact with other cultures and do occasionally include members of other races. However, one should not assume that this compromise is conclusive, nor fail to appreciate the importance of further investigation on the matter. As we will discuss later, there are some important observations about the genetic peculiarities of Roma; likewise, their social identity often overshadows – or even entirely contradicts – racial categorization. Due to the cross-cultural intent of this analysis – and especially considering the race-culture interactions that are similarly found in Jewish populations - we will treat the Roma here as a group with both racial and cultural connotations.

Though multiple social and cultural groups are often identified in Georgia as “Gypsy peoples,” including ethnic Moldovans and Kurdish Travelers, it is the ethnic Roma themselves who represent the most cohesive and historically autonomous group. In this analysis, insofar as it is possible to distinguish between the groups (taking exception to statistical surveys and personal interviews in

which officials fail to indicate any distinctions), we will refer to Moldovans and Kurdish Travelers as “Gypsy traveler” peoples, and the ethnic Roma as simply “Roma.”

When considering classification, it is perhaps most important to note that Georgian officials working with the Roma address the group as an inclusive cultural category *rather than a strictly racial one*. The terms “Roma” and “Romani” are used by such individuals to identify any “Gypsy traveler” group; in other words, groups that are essentially stateless, lacking documentation and access to public projects such as education and healthcare, whose nomadic lifestyles are viewed as a significant cultural attribute – and who are given to begging, collecting metal and telling fortunes (personal interview, September 2012). Ethnic Moldovans and Kurdish Travelers, who share a similar degree of social marginalization as the ethnic Roma and meet the aforementioned criterion for “Gypsy travelers,” are likewise lumped into this group. The Moldovans and Kurdish Travelers are included among the “Gypsy” group in the same way that Irish travelers are considered “Gypsy,” despite having no ethno-historical connection to the Roma peoples. Though this view presents some difficulty for ethnic Roma – and the other separate ethnic minorities included in this group – because it fails to establish any autonomy among these groups and minimizes their distinct cultural identities, it is not an altogether uncommon perspective. As Jiri Lipa notes in *The Fate of the Gypsies in Czechoslovakia under Nazi Domination*, the Roma have undergone this process of reclassification in European spaces throughout history:

“The process of gradual assimilation of all Gypsies to their respective European environments was [at the beginning of World War II] in progress at different paces in different ways throughout Europe. In spite of the fact that sedentary Gypsies spoke the Gypsy language to one another, they had come to be perceived by the surrounding majority population less

and less as a different ethnic group and more as a social group with a low social status." (Jiri Lipa, *The Fate of the Gypsies in Czechoslovakia under Nazi Domination*, p. 208.)

This classification of Roma as a social group allows for the inclusion of non-ethnic Roma, as observed in Georgia and elsewhere. Georgian officials may be more inclined to address the Roma as a social group for a number of additional reasons. These officials have increasingly attempted to combat the social isolation and marginalization of Roma in Georgia, which is more easily accomplished when the commonalities between the marginalized group and mainstream society are emphasized, and racial and cultural differences – being altogether difficult to change – are dismissed. In this case, the prospect of cultural autonomy on the part of Roma is not conducive to the desired assimilation, and has consequently been ignored.

These officials are also addressing a group with a very small population. The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) estimated the number of Roma people living in Georgia to be 1,200-1,300 in 2007; though this figure seems to be a substantial increase from the 472 individuals indicated in the national census for 2002, it should be noted that reports such as those released by the ECMI do not differentiate between ethnic Roma and "Gypsy peoples" – resulting in a higher overall population tally (*The Georgian Times*). As efforts to integrate the Roma are more feasible when the category is expanded to include other socially similar groups, the need for integration-aimed projects appears more pressing. Likewise, the practicality of these projects seems more realistic.

This view of the Roma as a socially inclusive group is contrasted, however, by a more exclusive attitude on the part of ethnic Roma themselves, who have vocalized an established distinction between themselves and the Moldovans and Kurdish Travelers with whom they are often categorized. According to statements made by Roma individuals in Tbilisi, ethnic Roma and Kurdish Travelers who beg, collect metal, and tell fortunes in the city have intentionally

separated themselves from one another - with the ethnic Roma doing business underground in the metro tunnels, and the Kurdish travelers populating the streets on Rustaveli. This above- and below-ground separation is indicative of a more deeply rooted separation of cultures, and a desire for autonomy on the part of each culture (personal interview, September 2012).

Georgian Roma further categorize themselves into three primary cultural branches that have not previously been documented. These branches include the Lakhumbi, who experience the highest degree of poverty and have made their living by collecting metal and offering to provide Tarot readings (principally to tourists); the Lashumbi, who are “expert swindlers and beggars,” and thereby earn more money than the Lakhumbi, who lack these skills; and the Crem – a truncated version of the term “Crimean” – who have migrated into Georgia from Ukraine, are more insulated as a community, and are viewed by other Roma as “less Georgian” than the previous groups (personal interview, September 2012).

Georgian Roma appear to adhere rather consistently with the Roma tradition of adopting outside religions wherever they travel. Roma coming from Russia tend to be Catholic or Orthodox, and those coming from Azerbaijan tend to be Muslim. Notably, though both the Lakhumbi and Lashumbi are believed to follow this pattern – integrating and assimilating whichever religious traditions happen to be prevalent in the area – the Crem are notorious for having converted to Christian Evangelism, and have attempted to introduce this religious tradition to others, contributing to their relatively high degree of isolation among other Roma groups (Szakonyi, 2008).

General Roma studies categorize the Roma diaspora into three primary sub-groups of Roma peoples: the Rom, who populate most of Europe; the Lom, who populate Central Eurasia, parts of the Near East and the Iberian Peninsula; and the Dom, who populate the Middle East and North Africa. Each of these

groups has a particular dialect of the Romani language, with the Rom speaking the standard northern Romani and Kalderash; the Lom speaking Lomavren (a dialect which, around the Mediterranean, comprises Spanish vocabulary, and in Central Eurasia includes Persian vocabulary); and the Dom speaking Domari (a dialect that reflects an Arabic influence) (Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, 2001). The Georgian Roma speak mostly Russian and a non-Lomavren dialect of Romani that incorporates a number of Russian loanwords. Most of the Roma are not fluent in Georgian, though programs implemented by the ECMI include Georgian language courses (personal interview, September 2012).

The lack of Lomavren dialects spoken among Georgian Roma, and the apparent existence of Russian loanwords within the Georgian Romani lexicon, is a vital observation for several reasons. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it confirms the migration of Roma from northern states. Though there is an established community of Lovari Roma inhabiting Armenia – often referred to as the Armenian Gypsies or Boshia – and this group has appeared in literature under such headings as “the Gypsies of Transcaucasia” and “Gypsies of the south Caucasus,” the Roma communities found in Tbilisi seem to have little, if any, direct cultural relation with Roma communities in Armenian lands (Marushiakova and Vesselin, 2001). Lovari are therefore not likely to represent the majority of Georgian Roma.

However, one should not conclude by the apparent prevalence of Russian and Ukrainian dialects of the Romani language in Georgia that it is not possible that other dialects might exist within the Georgian Roma diaspora. It is more likely that Roma populating the areas near the Azerbaijani border are Lovari and speak Lomavren, as the ECMI reports that a number of such Roma claim to hold Azerbaijani citizenship; and it is altogether unlikely that these individuals would speak a non-Lomavren dialect. It should also be noted, again, that the Roma community in Tbilisi has deliberately distinguished itself from the Kurdish travelers – who, as Kurds, are more likely to speak Lomavren. The

rejection of Lomavren dialects by ethnic Roma may therefore be a consequence of their rejection of Kurdish culture at large.



Figure 1: Living Condition in Roma Housing Unit, Samgori District, Tbilisi (Photo Taken by Author)
 Some 75 Roma individuals occupy a small commune in the Samgori District. Though living quarters are cramped and there is limited access to water and electricity, the families are happier living here than they have been elsewhere as the unit's proximity to the city dump discourages the presence of onlookers, outsiders and harassment by police (personal interview, September 2012).

Unsurprisingly, the degree of social integration among Georgian Roma is very low. The ECMI and the Georgian Ministry of Education have each created and sustained integration projects throughout the country, collaborating where



Figure 2: Group of Roma children in Samgori District, Tbilisi (photo taken by author)
 According to the ECMI, only 5% of children in the Samgori District were attending school in 2008 (Szakonyi, 2008).

they can – especially where data collection is concerned. The ECMI, in particular, is responsible for creating a small youth drama club in Kakheti, sponsored by a British organization. This project brings together local Roma and non-Roma children, and encourages them to collaborate on a play for the local community. The program appears to have been relatively successful in encouraging the Roma and non-Roma groups to work together, and helps to dispel many of the negative

stereotypes that Georgians have regarding Roma. Such projects, having produced relatively successful results, have increased awareness and public engagement in Roma issues (personal interview, September 2012).

Still, the levels of education and documentation among Georgian Roma are very low. According to the ECMI, only 5% of Roma children in Tbilisi were attending school in 2008; and this number did not exceed 15% for any Roma group in Georgia during that year (Szakonyi, 2008). Moreover, Roma fortune tellers and beggars throughout Tbilisi were subject to harassment and violence from both civilians and Georgian officials. Multiple claims have surfaced – in unofficial reports and complaints – that law enforcement officials have a habit of collecting Roma children from the street and giving them to children's homes, where officials know that the parents are not able to present the birth certificate necessary to collect their children (personal interview, 2008). Though Roma individuals born in Georgia are, according to the Georgian constitution, granted Georgian citizenship that entitles them to public education and healthcare, there has been very little effort from Georgian officials to make the Roma aware of their rights as citizens. These issues have made it very difficult for Roma to integrate into Georgian society (Szakonyi, 2008).

The Ebraeli Jews of Georgia

The first major migration of Jews into Georgia occurred in the sixth century B.C., with the conquering of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and consequent expulsion of Jews from the region. According to tradition – and convincing historical evidence – a faction of Jews who fled Israel during this time managed to find asylum in Georgia. This group remained in Georgia; and the community of Jews in Tbilisi, who call themselves the Ebraeli, are direct descendants (Dymshits, 1999, p.118-119).

There are two synagogues in Tbilisi – a “Georgian synagogue” and an “Ashkenazic synagogue” – though both practice a form of Judaism that is traditionally Sephardic (personal interview,



Figure 3: Passover Seder in Tbilisi, 1924 (Dymshits, 1999)

September 2012). Since the Sephardic diaspora cannot be divided into theological movements in the same way as the Ashkenazim, it would not be technically accurate to classify the Ebraeli as Orthodox in the theological sense. In layman's terms, however, their traditions are orthodox, with a lowercase “o.” The Ebraeli practice – and are descended from – an older, undivided interpretation of Judaism that is found in similar forms throughout Oriental Jewry in Central Eurasia and the Caucasus; it is orthodox in the sense that it is very traditional, and closely aligned with the ancient traditions of Judaism (Blady, 2000).

The experience of Jews in Georgia is extraordinarily unique. As Jews have been an integrated ethnic minority in Georgia for as long as they have existed there, Georgia has never experienced an institutionalized persecution of Jews. Some sources credit this high degree of integration to the treatment of Armenians who – in Georgia – have historically been given the unwanted and despised occupational positions normally reserved for Jews elsewhere. This has allowed the Jews to avoid social resentment and isolation, and has further facilitated their ease of social mobility. Further attesting to the historical lack of Ashkenazim in Georgia, there is no indication of Yiddish having ever been spoken among Ebraeli. Most written documents, prayers and songs attributed to the Ebraeli will therefore appear in classical Hebrew, cursive Hebrew or Georgian (personal interview, September 2012).



Figure 4: Jewish students posing in front of the synagogue, Oni, 1910 (Dymshits, 1999).

The Georgian population of Jews is exceptionally small, following waves of emigration to Israel – first in the 1970s and again in the 1990s. There is, in fact, a much larger population of Georgian Jews in Israel now than there is in Georgia (Blady, 2000). This facilitates a higher degree of cultural insulation, as the diminishing population prompts a declining interest on the part of Georgian culture to accommodate and familiarize themselves with Ebraeli culture (personal interview, September 2012).

Unlike the Roma, the Georgian Ebraeli experience a high degree of social integration and can navigate Georgian society without many obstacles. A number of Jewish people populate the workforce in a variety of positions as writers, scientists, musicians and government officials; in Tbilisi, the Jewish community has its own publication called *Menorah*. Among the Ebraeli and ethnic Georgians, there is little evidence that cultural isolation and persecution exist (personal interview, September 2012).

Integration, Identity and Methodology

There is a great deal of methodological overlap in both Jewish and Roma studies. There is, however, much more contrast in their levels of integration in

Georgia. The Jewish community has become culturally insulated, but is not isolated; nor is it subject to the same degree of discrimination as experienced by the Roma. Official projects do not exist to facilitate the integration of Jews into Georgian culture because their level of integration is essentially complete: The Ebraeli have existed in Georgia for more than 2,000 years, have never been officially persecuted, and have thereby managed to eke out a substantial place for themselves in Georgian society.

The Roma, by contrast, have never constituted a sizable minority in Georgia; nor have they ever experienced even a modest degree of integration. The marginalization and oppression normally experienced by Roma throughout history and across the world remain quite visible in Georgia, and seem exacerbated by the fact that they have scarcely, if ever, been formally studied. Recent efforts to integrate the Roma have come at a time when their numbers have grown so substantially that they can no longer be ignored (personal interview, September 2012). Poverty among the Roma can be readily seen on virtually any street in Tbilisi, in the metro tunnels and in the small, densely crowded communities in which they live. Indeed, in an article assessing the social position of the Roma in Georgia, *The Georgian Times* explicitly refers to them as "the most marginalized ethnic group in the country;" the article further emphasizes their inability to procure documentation and their subsequently restricted access to public education, healthcare and employment – things which are readily available to Georgian Ebraeli. If the population trends continue heading in this direction, with Georgian Jews emigrating to Israel and the Roma settling in, expanding and, ideally, experiencing increasing degrees of socialization under the projects implemented by the ECMI and Ministry of Education – and the social projects being implemented continuing to grow – it is feasible the Jewish community may become more isolated, while the Roma continue to become integrated.

It is, however, evident that the uniquely stable nature of the Ebraeli community in Georgia, and in Tbilisi in particular, has contributed to their higher degree of integration. Though both the Jewish and Roma diasporas are known for – and, indeed, defined by – their identities as trans-national groups, adapting to shifting cultural landscapes without ever fully assimilating, the Jewish diaspora has a more consistent history of establishing fixed communities in foreign lands; in Georgia, the sheer age of that community – which is more than 2,000 years old – has allowed the Ebraeli to integrate to such a degree that they have almost completely assimilated. By contrast, Georgia's Roma community has only recently begun to grow, and has not been exposed to the circumstances necessary for full integration – including the ability to evade persecution. The Ebraeli were able to integrate due, in part, to the fact that they did not occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder – a position that was handed instead to the Armenians; though one may argue, based on this study, that the Roma now occupy that position and are therefore at a clear disadvantage.

It is evident from this comparison that the age of the stateless diaspora in a host culture – in addition to its relative social status (and the existence of a cultural “scapegoat” that may often be found in the form of another stateless diaspora) – are essential in assessing its level of integration and, subsequently, its cultural identity. As we have observed, the degree of integration experienced by these diasporas have affected how their identities are transmitted. Though the Ebraeli have been allowed to successfully integrate into Georgian culture, something of their identity has been lost as a result: There is a declining interest in learning about the Ebraeli culture, facilitated by their gradual assimilation and shrinking population. The Ebraeli have begun to “blend in,” as it were, and the study of their culture comes primarily in the form of recent historical accounts and oral ethnographies transmitted by Georgian Ebraeli now living in Israel – the diaspora of the diaspora, no longer fully Georgian. By contrast, the minimally-integrated Georgian Roma have been marginalized to such a degree that their

identity has remained tightly guarded and easily recognizable. Methodological models that attempt to understand the identities of these unique diasporas must therefore consider the interrelated nature of integration, assimilation and culture – and how these diasporas have independently adapted in shared spaces.

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