

Identities under Construction: Towards a Museum of Roma People in Romania

Abstract. *This article is a reflection upon the timeliness and possibility of establishing a Museum of Roma People, more specifically, a museum able to (re)present the Roma cultural identity in contemporary Romania. Having in mind Bauman's reflections on identity, the aim of this study is to provide arguments in favour of the idea that the purpose of a Museum of Roma People should be to bring to life and give voice to various Roma identities, as lived and negotiated nowadays within compact Roma communities, as well as outside them.*

Keywords: cultural identity, dialogue, museum, Roma.

We no longer believe that there are people without history. The contemporary ethnographic challenge is to enter into and understand those ongoing histories from the vantage point of everyday life²⁰.

Richard Jenkins

If the modern problem of identity is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open³.

Zygmunt Bauman

At the time of Romanian nationalist ideology, the central museums have focused their discourse on the peasant, as "representative of the whole people, which thus becomes, in an identity declarative way, a peasant-people"⁴. The purpose of this process of heritagization carried out in the institutional sphere was "thereby

to enhance the image of a unitary national culture, closer to a generic rural people"⁵. The use of the peasant's figure as representative image for the Romanian people and its heritagization "is part of the general approach of the time when the States

in search of new forms of legitimacy, find their roots in the popular culture"⁶. What about the national minorities, such as Roma people? What is the relevance of a Museum focusing its discourse on Roma? How could Roma identity be approached by professionals of culture?

In my opinion, the arguments in support of the necessity of such a museum can be diverse and even conflicting, depending on perspective. An ethnographic position confining itself to the old ideology of the need for an "encyclopaedic museum", even if advocated in the name of a "generous humanism"⁷, may regret the absence of such a museum. According to this perspective, not to put into

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heritage a traditional material culture that belongs to Roma people would be a loss for universal cultural heritage. An argument of this kind would be unlikely to enter the agenda of the Roma civic activists, as they would probably conceive the museum in a completely different way, namely as a moral and social need to support the identity of a historically oppressed and currently discriminated population; moreover, it might even be considered offensive.

However, the purpose of this paper is not to militate in favour of any one argument. Considering that the necessity of a Roma museum is underpinned by historical, cultural and political reasons, we try to find "forms of expression" for Roma identity that could enter such a museum. How could Roma identity be represented through the institutional logics of heritagization? This question is not solely directed at the professional community that normally undertakes the task of creating a museum, i.e. at museologists and museographers. This is primarily because the project of a museum of Roma people requires a prior discussion on identity. In other words, before considering the museological strategies, collection policies and display techniques, a museum of Roma identity set up in the 21st century should have a consistent view on the major theoretical debates (and open social conflicts) that involve the idea of identity nowadays, as approached by sociology, anthropology, political sciences, etc. That said, this article does not intend to take a stand in the debates on identity as if speaking on behalf of an official institution – a Museum, as such, should be assumed by the government or by the formal and informal representatives of Roma people in Romania. Rather, this article aims at emphasizing what a museum of this kind should NOT be and how it could be designed to avoid some of the pitfalls identified during the last century by the practice and scientific literature concerning the representation of cultural identity in a museum.

The theoretical approach takes into account the constructivist idea of identity, which is placed at the opposite side of the essentialist one. Having in mind Bauman's reflection about identity this research is not interested in picking up an identity that is considered frozen in time, but rather consider identity opened to numerous voices that, in this case, correspond to various Roma identities. In trying to "avoid fixation and keep the options open", as Bauman⁸ claimed, one must consider Roma identity as an ongoing process of construction. On the other hand, given that "we no longer believe that there are *people without history*"⁹, it can be considered that "the contemporary ethnographic challenge is to enter into and understand those ongoing histories from the vantage point of everyday life"¹⁰. Therefore, the Roma identity is considered here in non-essentialist terms (i.e. this is not about discovering and reifying once and for all, in a museum, the "true Roma identity"), but rather in terms of a plurality of discourses on Roma, inside and outside the Roma community.

Given that the historical context in which a museum of Roma people would arise and the multiple identities experienced every day by each person in the 21st century, we consider that a museum of Roma identity needs to be a platform of dialogue and mutual understanding of difference. Nevertheless, the analysis will make reference to the cultural, political and social conditions of the building of a Roma identity, in an attempt to suggest several solutions from the perspective of new museum studies. This study is divided into three sections. The first section of the analysis concerns the contexts in which the Roma identity is being built today, contexts which produce different identity claims. The second section presents arguments for a museum that could represent Roma identity

from the inside. Finally, the third section concerns Roma identity as constructed from the outside, as reflexion of the others' discourses about Roma identity.

What does feeling Roma mean in today's Romania?

Considering there are at least two major but diverging self-identification discourses of the Roma people, i.e. the one of the "traditionalists" and the one promoted by Roma NGO activists, it should be distinguished, first of all, between the contexts in which the Roma identity is being built today: on one hand, a context of cultural difference, of ethnicity assumed as a right to cultural difference; and on the other hand, a context of social and political claims concerned with the right to equality rather than the right to difference, that is, with individual rather than community rights. The inherent tension between the two current approaches to building the Roma identity based on claiming rights is particularly problematic, as it entails all the issues confronting the ethnic entities that have not experienced the historical moment of incorporation into a nation state and, consequently, all the dilemmas generated by the idea of building an "extraterritorial nation". Moreover, the particularities of Roma history in Eastern Europe encumber the approaches of identity that proved effective in other cases (see, for instance, the political history of and solutions for building the identity of "primary nations", "natives", etc. in the 20th century).

How can one represent a polymorphously experienced identity?

Whether from the perspective of the right to cultural differences or from the position of political claims and citizenship, the fact of living one's own Roma identity nowadays looks like a continuous and difficult negotiation. In any case, this assumption of a lived identity can be studied in terms of dynamics of the relationship between traditional culture and the impact of modernity. Therefore, any project for a Museum of Roma People should take into account both contexts, without essentializing either of them. However, an initial pitfall into which the good intentions could lead the Museum project is that of forcing consensus in a place where it is actually absent. Regarding Roma identity, the position of the leaders of the main traditionalist communities and that of certain leaders of the major Roma NGOs may prove irreconcilable. Obviously, it would be a mistake for the museum discourse to ignore the fact that feeling, for instance, "*corturar*" (i.e. nomadic Roma living in tents), is not the same thing as feeling Roma (of any subgroup), more specifically as a discriminated citizen and member of a national minority that needs recognition of its civil rights and equality before the law. With regard to this dynamic, no one, much less a museum, is entitled to decide without consultation what being or feeling Roma should mean today. By ignoring, muffling or misrepresenting various discourses on Roma identity, a museum would assume a role and a right that nobody has. Admitting this fact could already outline an idea of what a Museum of Roma People could be: an open platform, responsive to the plurality of voices, even when they are not in tune. It would be less of an institution collecting objects, traces, signs of an ossified cultural identity and more of a place for meeting and consultation with representatives of communities for a continuous negotiation of identity. Last, but not least, it would be a space that, like a sound box, would amplify the muffled voices of discriminated communities and a platform of memory restored by the accounts of all those who have never had the right or chance to continuo-

usly repeat and interpret their identity story. From this point of view, it is not the state, the museum or the curators appointed by the government that should tell the story of Roma people, but Roma people themselves, in a space of dialogue, even though affected by the lack of homogeneity. The Museum of Roma People should belong to the Roma people.

On the other hand, it is obvious that museums were, in the 19th and 20th centuries, an essential identity factor and an ideological instrument for political construction, a tool held by the political elites and used in forging the nation. The feeling of historical injustice that an ethnic group may experience in the 21st century due to the impossibility of forming a nation state based on the model and means of the 19th century cannot justify, in any case, a return to the museum practices and policies that were used to "invent" nations. If it is to belong to Roma people, however, the Museum of Roma should not look like the national museums have looked until recently. While it is a difficult situation, liable to generate confusion and frustration, it could nevertheless be considered an opportunity for the Roma people. This is because a space that inherently pursues the free building of an identity and attempts to recover the memory as a living thing would offer them a chance to understand their own culture in the context of today's increasingly globalized but also more and more localized world.

Identity in the mirror of the Other?

Besides this approach that considers the plurality of self-identification voices and discourses, moving upwards, from communities to the public space, the project of a museum should take into account another factor that affects the building of an identity: hetero-identification, the discourse of the others about what and who Roma people are. This massive discourse of the majority is to be analyzed in terms of discrimination, negative clichés and the persistence of a historical demonization of the Roma people. The analysis of this demonization brings to light the suffering and difficulty of so many people in living their own Roma identity in relation to the others, in compact communities, as well as in society in a broader sense. To the extent that cultural identity is in most cases built through cultural representations, and as these representations are created and re-created by the prejudices of the majority about the "gypsy" – this dangerous "other" – a Museum of Roma identity could also be conceived as a Museum of the Other. The image of the Alien, of a threatening, dangerous or impure Other, has been cast on the Roma with consequences that we all know: exclusion, condemnation to isolation, silence, social and political oppression. Considering these obvious facts, a Museum of Roma People should also have a specular dimension of an identity mirrored by the negative stereotypes that plague the history and self-concept of Roma communities. Besides the task of collecting historic evidence on the demonization of the gypsy, besides the necessary repertory of atrocities committed against the Roma population, besides the reckoning, no matter how comprehensive, of the representations and practices of the majority with regard to and against a minority, the mission of a 21st century museum would be to challenge and destabilize such representations and practices. Such a museum would do this directly, bluntly, with unusual means or in spaces and on occasions that do not warn the audience that they are going to witness an act related to the sad history of the Roma.

The two following approaches as to how a political and anthropological view on representing identity can be converted into a museum strategy could destabilize the latent

prejudices of the public:

Let's imagine that one day, in Bucharest, on the sidewalk in front of the *National Village Museum*, a caravan of poor *Rudari* Roma would appear, with their horses, wagons and collected scrap iron, camping there symbolically, in a kind of mobile pavilion placed *outside* the village represented by the Museum, at the periphery of the idealized image of the Romanian village. The pavilion could be entitled *the National Museum of Village Periphery*. Various strategies to advertise an exhibition placed in a different location, at the Museum of Roma People, could be developed around this inopportune presence.

Likewise, a temporary multimedia show on the dynamics of interethnic relations in the rural space can be organized at the Romanian Peasant Museum in cooperation with the Museum of Roma People.

These ways of prompting a dialogue with the public, no matter how unlikely they may seem at this moment because of administrative and institutional reasons, are not impossible. This fact is confirmed by the recent history of a museology engaged in a critical dialogue with anthropology, sociology and cultural theory, on one hand, and with the political establishment, on the other hand. Because these strategies are primarily concerned with ways of avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and of an idealized presentation of a culture, they can help create a living museum that is much more than an ossuary or a cabinet of curiosities.

Before discussing the vision that underpins this type of attitude in museum studies, another imagined counterfactual way to represent the Roma identity as seen in the mirror of the Other could provide an opportunity to overcome the conflicting relationship associated with Roma people. In this instance, however, the perspective is reversed, i.e. from the perspective of representation of the danger-and-impurity-bearing Alien in traditional Roma culture. A *Museum of the Gadjo* could be the screen on which a culture projects its deepest identity features, everything that makes it a *specific* culture, different from *any other culture*. At first glance a Museum of the Gadjo may be seen as an impiety or a sacrilege by traditionalist Roma, as a collection of unveiled secrets and broken taboos. However, it need not be so. Rather, the Museum of the Gadjo could be a space that speaks of the interdict without violating it. Above all, it could be imagined as a space open to multiple logics, in which magical realism coexists with the modern principles of positive reason, in a relationship that involves tension but not mutual exclusion. An example of a collection policy that makes it possible to exhibit certain objects that are subject to gender and touching restrictions would require the curatorial team be formed of men and women who would handle those objects as required by tradition. As Jeffrey E. Mauger and Janine Bowe chop¹¹ point out, such practices are already usual in many "community museums" or "tribal museums". In any case, a museum that presents the profound logic of a culture in relation to everything that differs from it would provide a good opportunity for such a culture to reconsider its own traditions, its own practices and representations. For both Roma and *gadjos*, a museum of this kind, focusing on the topic of *mutual misunderstanding*, would be in fact an opportunity to understand each other and to negotiate the deepest meanings of cultural proximity and distance. While the public announcement of a project like this might stir strong reactions, ranging from anger to derision, the event would nevertheless generate an authentic debate in the public space over the identity of Roma people. If all the parties concerned participate in the negotiation, and if the project team includes both Roma and non-Roma people, activists and traditionalists, museology

experts and sociologists, all with a transparent agenda of cultural policies, then this project for a Museum of Roma People could prove a worthwhile endeavor.

The Museum of Roma People – identities under construction, face to face

Assuming that a Museum of Roma People is necessary and would be in itself an identity building factor (as it re-presents and makes manifest and visible a certain understanding of identity), previous sections of this paper conceived of the Museum of Roma People as an open cultural institution that would avoid the pitfalls of reifying, ideologizing and ossifying an identity that undergoes continuous reformulation. When developed from a perspective of museum studies and of new debates around the idea of an anthropological museum, the argument is that an institution of this type should be more than a place for displaying a cultural heritage. It should rather be the place where both members and non-members of the respective ethnic community can relate to their own thinking habits. A museum of this kind could be conceived as an echo chamber, wherein the Roma identity is prompted to rethink itself and the non-ethnics are challenged to see themselves in a diverse and inhomogeneous way from the perspective of those who live that Roma identity. Without going into details related to the design of such an institution of culture, several guidelines could nevertheless be taken into account:

A museum "hears" various and sometimes diverging discourses coming from communities and individuals that live their Roma identity in continuous negotiation. The museum would not establish itself as the sole and official voice that tells once and for all the story of Roma identity.

The plurality of voices that compose the jigsaw puzzle of Roma identity should not beedulcorated ideologically to eliminate all harshness and to make it seem as though the different approaches mask internal tension. When the Roma identity faces a dilemma, the museum should not conceal it, but rather bring it to light in a space of negotiation. As Jette Sandahl said in a kind of retrospective manifesto regarding the policies of the institutions that she led (the Museum of World Culture), "the diversity we seek to articulate is less one of easy harmony than one of recognition of conflicts"¹².

The museum should not be a sumptuous mausoleum of the Roma material and cultural heritage, but rather a working platform that can be used to interpret the past through the present, as well as to interpret the present based on the current legitimate aspirations of Roma people. In other words, the museum could assume the mission of recovering the cultural memory, as well as the role of a civic and militant platform. The phrase used by Des Griffin when commenting on the situation of Australian museums is both accurate and vivid, as it shows how forward-thinking museums can play a fundamental political role: "In these contested and sometimes unsafe space-times, many museums are light-years ahead of political leadership"¹³.

Far from the model of the ethnographic museums that "own collections" instead of temporarily hosting a heritage and inviting dialogue, a Museum of Roma People designed as a meeting space and as a "mirror museum of cultural differences" would be more effective as a point of social interaction, in a broader sense, for both Roma and non-Roma people. The more vivid, challenging and present it is within the social life, the more effective a museum of this kind would be. Apart from the imaginary experiments of museum guerrilla

(the "National Museum of Village Periphery" or the "Museum of the Gadjo"), various strategies can be developed to comment, challenge and displace the cultural stereotypes, always keeping in mind the phrase of SE Weil, which has become a maxim for new museum trends: "From being *about* something to being *for* somebody"¹⁴.

Finally, there is another pitfall that a museum of this kind should and can avoid: reifying the traditions in a museum and unidimensionally marketing a living identity, thus causing it to be either sub-represented or suffocated. Although the marketing of traditions or, in a broader sense, the marketing of a traditional culture has been and still is an instrument of "cultural diplomacy"¹⁵ that militates for a social or economic benefit of a disfavoured population, a present-day museum should aspire to be more than that. Besides and beyond such marketing, the museum should be constantly engaged in the archaeology of the present, synchronous with the actual evolution of a culture's dynamic; moreover, it should use the instruments of sociology and anthropology to remain in contact with the permanently changing present.

Des Griffin's reflections help us to conclude and to emphasize once more the fundamentally positive role that the museums nowadays have in general and that can now also play on behalf of certain populations, cultures or identities hurt by history:

"If there is any role more important that museums must play, it is promoting the understanding that leads to the acknowledgment by all peoples that human rights are properly rights of all peoples. [...] Museums are often cast as being about the past but they can be about the future as well. Only by addressing the fears and respecting the aspirations of others, by celebrating our common humanity, can we live together"¹⁶.

References

- 1 Beneficiary of the project "Constructing and implementing an interdisciplinary innovative doctoral programme concerning Roma issues", co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund, Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013.
- 2 Jenkins, 2008, 5.
- 3 Bauman, 1996, 18.
- 4 Mihăilescu, 2008, 221.
- 5 Mihăilescu, 2008, 220.
- 6 Catrina, 2011, 131.
- 7 Cuno, 2011.
- 8 Bauman, 1996, 18.
- 9 Jenkins, 2008, 5.
- 10 *Ibid*, 5.
- 11 Mauger and Bowe chop, 2006.
- 12 Sandahl, 2005, 37.
- 13 Des Griffin, 2005, 85.
- 14 Weil, 1999, 256.
- 15 Wallis, 1994, 265.
- 16 Des Griffin, 2005, 92.

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