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Imagining the Past, Creating Identity: the Case of the Bayash*

Based on fieldwork conducted among several Bayash communities in the Balkans, the author examines the way in which the interlocutors assume an identity and try to construct a past for their people, using etiological legends about the origin of their community which combine heterogeneous historical and geographical knowledge. The author shows that imagining their past is as problematic for the Bayash as it is for any other Roma or non-Roma group; the author argues that the eclectic nature of this process is heralded by the fact that it is a regular stage in the development of the historical thinking of each nation.

Key words:

Bayash, Roma, identity, etiological legends, naïve etymology, Balkans

1. The Bayash in the Balkans and Europe

The Bayash are small Roma-like communities speaking different sub-dialects and vernaculars of the Romanian language as their mother tongue, and living dispersed throughout Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, with smaller numbers in Macedonia, Greece, Ukraine, Slovakia and Slovenia. They also inhabit other European countries, such as Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Cyprus, where they have arrived relatively recently, from the above mentioned states, as guest workers, legal or illegal migrants, or war refugees.¹ They do not speak Romani and the vast majority are bilingual or multilingual, actively using their native vernacular, the dialect of the surrounding population and, in the case of migrant workers, the language spoken in the new environment. *Bayash* is in many cases only a construct employed by academics to re-

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¹ Scientific interest in the Bayash all over Europe has increased significantly in the last decade. For details on the Bayash in the Balkans, see: Sikimić 2005; on Bayash guest workers, see: Leschber 2008, Slavkova 2008.

fer to these groups, many of whom do not use or even know the term. The Bayash, because of their semi-nomadic way of life, mentality and physical characteristics are considered Gypsies by others and sometimes they identify themselves as Gypsies or Roma. Until recently, they have preserved their traditional occupation, namely woodwork, which is why they are often called spoon- or spindle makers, even if this occupation is only pursued by a few today. Now some are adjusting to village life; others are still peripatetic, traveling in order to sell goods, but the wooden objects have been replaced by plastic or textile ones; some of them “re-oriented” towards other crafts, filling in new occupational gaps.

2. Material and Method

This contribution is based on audio-recorded interviews conducted with Bayash from different regions all over Serbia (2003–2008, 150 hours), in three settlements in Baranja and one in Medjmurje, Croatia (2006, 20 hours),² and five settlements in northwestern Bulgaria (2008, 20 hours). During our anthropologic and linguistic fieldwork research, we interviewed mainly older persons and audio-recorded all the interviews. The interviews took place in the informants’ houses, in an informal setting, and generally lasted around two hours. We tried to interview one person at a time, for the sake of accuracy of the recording, but in many cases the whole family took part in the conversation. The great majority of the participants were eager to talk to the interviewer and were amazed to find out that their community could be of interest in scientific circles. As the Bayash do not have access to schooling in Romanian, they were very curious to see how their language could be written down. Most of the interviews were semi-directed, the discussions generally aimed at reconstructing the traditional culture, but we also recorded the free conversations of the participants. We encouraged them to speak freely about themselves and about their community, the idea being that autobiographic interviews can show how they relate to their own community, memory and past, how they see themselves in relation to others, how they are seen by the others and to what degree this view from the outside influences their discourse. The aim of our research was therefore twofold: apart from collecting samples of direct speech for linguistic and dialectal purposes, we also tried to gather material for the reconstruction of the traditional culture and oral history of the Bayash. We believe our research is of paramount importance, as almost none of the Bayash communities we explored have been investigated so far and because all the recordings were made in the mother tongue of the participants, which adds to the very limited corpus of Bayash original texts.

² A significant number of these recordings have been transcribed and published in Sorescu-Marinković 2008.

3. Etiological Legends and Ethnic Mythology

Legitimizing ideologies played an important role in the life of various peoples and, in the course of time, it has taken on a variety of forms: from legends of the origin of peoples (*origines gentium*), which acted as means of creating a sense of unity amongst a particular community of people, to foundation legends, and myths of common ancestry (Jones 1999, 693). The distant past in which people place their myths of common ancestry is the past beyond individual memory, and beyond the memory of other contemporaneous individuals. According to Jan Assmann, myths are placed in the *distant* “cultural memory”, while *recent* “communicative memory” encompasses autobiographic and generational recall, and refers to a period not longer than 80 or 100 years in relation to the moment of remembrance, which means 3–4 generations back in time (Assmann 2005). Assmann also noticed that, when talking about their origins, people make use of myths from the distant past and of events from the recent past. In a famous study about oral tradition in Africa, Jan Vansina emphasized a similar division between a recent and a distant past, showing that in societies whose language has no written standard there is usually what he calls a *floating gap* in the orally transmitted knowledge about the past: “Historical consciousness works on only two registers: time of origin and recent times. I have called the gap a *floating gap*”, because the limit one reaches in time reckoning moves with the passage of generations (Vansina 1985, 24).

In Eviatar Zerubavel’s terms, individuals are members of particular *mnemonic communities* and thus they are constantly subject to *mnemonic transitiveness*, a social practice of socialization, which provides them with *mnemonic tradition*. However, because of employment of the principle of socially constructed time, members of these communities hardly ever reach a consensus over particular events in the past and, even when a consensus is reached, it is a temporary state, subject to future revision (Zerubavel 2004).

As for the Balkans, according to Bulgarian ethnologists Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, history, myth and folklore traditions have a special place in the life of the Balkan nations, where the processes of ethno-national development began later than in Western Europe, and are still active (Marushiakova and Popov 2000, 82). The Roma in the Balkans are no exception to this situation. One of the ways in which they address their historical dimension and refer to their past is through oral etiological legends. These legends about the origin of their people form a particularly well-developed and diverse genre which helps construct the national mythology of the Roma, where their origin as a people is a primary question whose answer is sought at folklore level. The etiological legends of the Roma are quite widespread in the Balkans, being popular among the Roma themselves and among the surrounding population as well. Some of the most frequently disseminated legends are probably foundation legends explaining the origin of Gypsies from a brother and a sister, the scattering of the Gypsies all over the world, then the legend of their mythical leaders and of the “lost kingdom” located in ancient Biblical Egypt, the cycle of legends about the Gypsy “King Pharaoh” etc.

4. The Bayash – Etiological Legends

With the Bayash (often considered a Roma group with a non-Roma preferred identity), almost each community has its own etiological legend, which is usually not known by other Bayash communities, nor by the surrounding population. In other words, the Bayash as a whole do not function as a *mnemonic community*, as they have no common, strong *mnemonic tradition*. These scattered legends follow no general pattern, and although encountered quite frequently in the field, they differ greatly from locality to locality. Because of their marginal social status, the Bayash and Roma in general are not mentioned in either official Romanian historiography or in that of the states where they live. So the Bayash history, which lacks any documents and exact dates, is now created and recreated with the help of their folklore, which is not a closed, self-sufficient and self-developing system, being strongly influenced by the “official” culture of the macro society in which they live and by the cultural and historical context of the Balkans.

4.1. The Bayash of Serbia

Due to the lack of any documents which would testify of their arrival in their present settlements, almost every Bayash group has its etiological legend. The common element of these legends is the fact that the ancestors (real “colonist heroes”) are said to have arrived by crossing the Danube, or from the Carpathians (two topographic symbols of present day Romania):

As I heard from old people, it’s a long time, a thousand years, maybe more, since they arrived. They came from the Carpathians (...). We are from there. (Mehovine, western Serbia)³

In most cases, the moment of their arrival in the Serbian lands is placed far back in the past, much further than any historical evidence would allow. In addition, many of the legends explain the origin of the Bayash from two or more brothers who fled across the Danube:

[They came] from Timișoara, over the Danube, there were two brothers [Vesa and Miloje], fled across the water. And they went to Bor. One of them, the other went to Majdanpek. And then they started wandering, the two brothers, looking for a place to settle. They had no idea their families and their relatives were to be in this place until this day. When they arrived, there was only one house here, of some Serbs called Pantelić. And two huts. (Mehovine, western Serbia)

When the Bayash intend to emphasize their Romanian origin, they mention different toponyms which might have been preserved in the collective memory (real *lieux de memoire*), names of mountains, towns or rivers – such as the Carpathians, Bucharest, the Danube – and might have marked the route they followed from the

³ All the quotations from Mehovine were published in the original Romanian vernacular in Sorescu-Marinković 2005.

Romanian lands to the present habitat.⁴ Interlocutors, however, when talking about their Romanian origin and language, frequently insert other landmarks as well, such as Georgia, Russia or India, the result being a bizarre contamination of heterogeneous geographical knowledge:

My mother's mother came from Georgia, from Bucharest. (Marinkovara, Belgrade quarter)

or:

I1: And we, who were transferred maybe millions of years ago, I don't know exactly, we are from India, from the Indian Carpathians we are here, in Serbia.

I2: Ever since Russia, the Carpathians and Romania exist. (Orašje, central Serbia)

The penetration of the "Indian thesis" into the origin of the Roma people was very important for the development of Romani historical thinking. This process was determined by the advancement of modern scientific knowledge on the Balkans and more particularly the concept of ancient India as the motherland of all Roma.⁵ As we can see from the transcripts, the Bayash, even if most of the time they prefer a non-Roma identity, might also include Indian elements in their foundation legends, where partial geographical knowledge mingles with contemporary information from quasi-historical sources.

As we mentioned earlier, this system of legends is permanently changing, depending on the cultural context and on the culture of the macro society in which the Bayash live. Most of the time, these newly-created legends are constructed and argued in a brilliant and most inventive way. One of the "methods" the Bayash resort to in order to make them believable and transform them into quasi-historical knowledge is to make reference to historians or scholars who allegedly wrote about the community. They even reconstruct the transmission of this information, imagining the process as an idyllic party and tale performing, where the Serbs listen and then write down the Bayash history:

We had a book here... *Posavina*. It was a yellow book. And it was also written in that book. [...] People would gather in the evening [...], they would sing, the fiddles and accordions would vibrate, and people would sing and tell stories. The Serbs would then hear one from another, words would travel from mouth to mouth and reach the Serbs and Milovan [Glišić] and then Milovan wrote about this place and we

⁴ It is acknowledged that remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people.

⁵ For more details about the reflection of the "Indian thesis" in the etiological legends of the Gypsies in Bulgaria, see: Marushiakova and Popov 2000, 86. See also Dragun 2000 for details on the legends on the Indian origin of Roma. The Roma of Vranje (southern Serbia) link the origin of the *Vasujlica* feast with the monsoon rains and floods in India, as well as with the goddess Kali (Zlatanović 2007).

have everything written down, everything that I tell you. (Mehovine, western Serbia)

As we mentioned before, the Bayash in Serbia do not have a common group identity and almost every Bayash community has its own legend – this also holds true for the majority of Bayash groups in Europe. Some of the etiological legends are better articulated, while others are mere sketches, reduced only to a few sentences. Paloma Gay y Blasco, talking about the Gypsies living in the south of Madrid, also noticed that they produce only highly schematic and comparatively underdeveloped accounts of their past as a group (Gay y Blasco 2001). Again, Gabriel Sala, speaking of the history of the Gabor Gypsies in Romania, says that only they possess a personal dimension of history, naming as their greatest ancestor their grand- or great-grandfather, and, according to the same historian, they seem “prisoners of the present, ignoring the passing of time or the glory of the past” (Sala 2007, 24). However, this does not hold true in all instances, and most importantly, one should not impose on the Bayash the Western notion that images of the past are prerequisite for the construction of one’s identity.

Another model according to which the Bayash structure their etiological legends is not the use of the Romanian element in their identity, as in the above-mentioned transcripts, but of a naïve etymology which explains the group’s ethnonym. The Karavlahs (“Black Vlachs”) of Bosnia – some of whom moved to southern Serbia – also make use of this type of naïve etymology in order to relate themselves to the Serbian king Karadjordje (“Black George”), thus linking the origin and early history of their community to important moments in Serbian history:

We are the descendants of Karadjordje. Because Karadjordje was *Karavla*. Black George. (...) That’s why the Turks were afraid of that Black George. (Lopare, northeastern Bosnia)⁶

The naïve etymology is not employed by the Bayash only to explain the origin of their own people, but also that of the majority of population, in an attempt to distance from it and to render a positive image of their own group:

We came here before the Serbs, before the Serbs we came, we are older than the Serbs. Well, we are the first people who arrived, and the Serbs came from Siberia, then they moved here. That’s why they are called Serbs, because they came from Siberia, if you heard of Siberia, there is always snow and ice. (Orašje, central Serbia)

Marianne Mesnil and Assia Popova discuss the different ways in which Balkan peoples designate the other, the stranger, noticing that neighboring peoples are negatively mythologized, being assigned either a pejorative origin or derogatory ethnic characteristics. The authors conclude that such exogenous mythical narration is concerned with the “disqualification” of the other and with rendering as positive an image as possible of oneself (Mesnil and Popova 1993).

⁶ Recorded by Biljana Sikimić in 2006. The results of this fieldwork are presented in Sikimić 2008.

Nevertheless, it is by no means rare that the Bayash collective memory contains no recollection of the fact that their place of origin was the Romanian lands or some other region, and they tell the researcher that they have lived where they are forever, being autochthonous in their present habitat. Because of the lack of any written documents and there where etiological legends have not been passed on, their memory usually goes back three or four generations, which confirms Assmann's theory of *communicative memory*.

4.2. The Bayash in Croatia

A wide range of patterns and variants of etiological legends are to be found among the Bayash of Serbia, the common element in most instances being Romania or some landmark (town, mountain, river etc.) of that country. As for Croatia, these observations cannot be applied. Our anthropological and linguistic field research conducted amongst schoolchildren and the younger population in the Bayash settlement of Kuršanec, in the Medjmurje region (far north of the country, near the border with Hungary and Slovenia) showed no awareness of the local vernacular as a clearly Romanian language, nor any idea of Romania as their country of origin. This attitude on the part of the younger generation can be explained by the fact that modern Croatia has no border with Romania and no ethnic Romanian minority, and that consciousness of their Romanian origin did not exist in the first place, as the places they had come from were at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Unfortunately, life expectancy of this group is very low, therefore we did not have the chance to speak to older members of the community, in order to collect possible etiological legends,⁷ but a few of the adults we interviewed could recall that their forefathers came from Hungary, which may easily point to the Romanian Banat and Transylvania.

However, in Baranja, the other Croatian region inhabited by Bayash and located in the east of the country close to the border with Serbia and Hungary, Bayash "identity discourse", which frequently includes foundation legends, is similar to that of the Bayash from Serbia:

[Gypsies settled in the village] many years ago, there were three brothers, here, in Darda, here in Zlatnica, former Zlatnica. (...) Three brothers. Steva, Jova and another one... I can't remember his name, I forget. Three brothers. And from those three brothers... Then Bolman, it was the same. Yes. Three brothers, yes, they settled here and then married [girls] from Bačka, Bački Monoštor and Torjanci... (Darda, eastern Croatia)

On the other hand, in Beli Manastir, the interlocutor's grand-grandfather is said to have come from Bucharest, which places the founding of the settlement in the more recent past:

⁷ Our oldest informant was a woman of around fifty.

We are Orthodox Vlachs. Real Romanians from Bucharest. My grandfather was from Bucharest. (Beli Manastir, eastern Croatia)

Many of the Bayash in Baranja on the occasion of the official censuses declared themselves as Roma, they called their language *româneșce* (“Romanian”) or *țigăneșce* (“Gypsy”). However, the question of their identity remained open in the discussion with the researcher:

I1: We are Romanians, but live in Croatia and Romania doesn’t recognize us, or at least it’s said it doesn’t recognize us. But never have we traveled there to hear whether they recognize us or not. It’s only people talking. We are Romanians. But live in Croatia, right? (...) But we don’t know the language the Roma speak at all, not a single word (...).

I2: For Germans we are *Zigeuner*, for others we are again Gypsies, for others we are Gypsies, you don’t know who to opt for, I have no idea, we don’t know what to opt for and to say this is our language and our country. We have no country. (Darda, eastern Croatia)

4.3. Rudari in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the *Rudari* are also referred to by different professionyms, such as: *Lingurari* (“spoon makers”) or *Copanari* (“tub makers” or “trough makers”), *Ursari*, *Mečkari* (“bear trainers”), *Majmundži* (“monkey trainers”), and rarely *Aurari* (“gold washers”). The *Ursari* infer their origin from an old legend about a girl who gave birth to a bear, which used to be widespread in the past in the Balkans, but is now almost forgotten (Marushiakova and Popov 1998, 107).

Marushiakova and Popov, speaking of the “third road” in declaring Gypsy identity, say that *Rudari* are beginning to present themselves as “true Vlachs” or “the oldest Romanians”,⁸ and one of their popular legends derives a *Rudari* origin from their ancient kingdom in the Balkans: following its destruction, some of them crossed the Danube and laid the foundations of the Romanian people, while their genuine direct ancestors, the *Rudari* of today, remained in the Bulgarian lands. In some instances, they have begun to employ quasi-historical knowledge, leaning on naïve historical research, which asserts the unity of *Rudari* with present day Romanians (Marushiakova and Popov 2000, 86). The same authors also mention the development of the ideology of the Democratic Movement “Rodolyubie” political party, the party of *Rudari*, registered in 1998, whose leader asserts that the term *Rudari* is not derived from *ruda* (“ore”) but from *rod* (“family” or “clan” in Bulgarian), because, as he puts it, they are descendants of the first old Bulgarian clans (*Op. cit.*, 89). During our fieldwork research in the *Rudari* communities of north-

⁸ Chelcea also mentions that in Muscel (southern Romania), the Bayash allege that they are “old Romanians”, the descendants of the Dacians, their ancestor being called “Dacia” (Chelcea 1944, 45).

western Bulgaria, we came across persons who stated that the term *Rudari* was derived from *ruda*, as well as from *rod* (Archar).

As for their ethnic origin, the most frequent identification of the Rudari is with the Thracians:

The first people in Bulgaria were the Thracians and we, the Vlachs, originate from the Thracians. (Lilyache, northwestern Bulgaria)

We note here the “double distancing” which frequently appears in Rudari or Bayash discourse: firstly, they adopt a preferred identity, which is always aiming at another minority with a higher social status than the Roma, in this case the Vlachs; secondly, they “double” it by an ancient origin, here “the first people in Bulgaria”, the Thracians.

Other informants also mention their Romanian origin:

We Rudari are from Romania, I guess. That’s why we know Romanian. (Koynare, northwestern Bulgaria),

sometimes saying that their flight across the Danube to the Bulgarian lands was caused by the cruelty of the Romanian *ciocoi* (“exploiters”). Finally, some Rudari say that they originate from Moldavia and arrived in their present settlement two or three hundred years ago. However, most of them believe they are autochthonous in the villages they inhabit.⁹

As for the system of etiological legends, the dichotomy *land* – *wood* is built up in different ways. During our fieldwork in Bulgaria, we came across a few patterns:

a) They lost the *land* and were forced to work with *wood*: Rudari originate from the Thracians. The Romans came, took their land, chased them away and, consequently, were forced to make wooden spoons and spindles for a living (Koynare, northwestern Bulgaria).

b) *wood* is easier to work with than *land*: Rudari, in fact Vlachs who originate from the Thracians, decided it was too difficult to work the land and that making wooden spindles was more convenient, and so it has remained to this day (Lilyache, northwestern Bulgaria).

c) “Fear of *land*” and “love of *wood*”: During the land reform in Romania, Rudari were also offered land, but they became terrified by “all that land” and fled the country to Bulgaria, where they started making wooden spoons (Archar, northwestern Bulgaria).

⁹ According to ethnologist Magdalena Slavkova, Rudari in northwestern Bulgaria have the smallest number of etiological legends, which may point to a long inhabitation of the Bulgarian lands, while the other Rudari groups all over Bulgaria preserve the tradition of coming from Romania.

5. Final Remarks

Even if these stories may be encountered quite frequently in the field and are related exclusively by the oldest people of the community, this does not necessarily mean that they are the keepers of a tradition that was passed on from generation to generation, because in many cases they form a strange combination of new and old historical knowledge. A far more frequent situation is that in which the Bayash freely narrate events placed in the recent past. Thus, the main opposition on which their discourse is based is “now” vs “before”. In their stories, “before” encompasses a period of time which extends back from the experiences of some older people of the community into a static past with no clearly marked borders (see also Gay y Blasco 2001). The life of “before” is remembered as a period of hunger and poverty, as a permanent traveling from village to village in order to find the necessary wood and sell their products. This *secondary past*, as it can be called, is interposed between the distant past of the legends and the present, and represents the only solid and reliable landmark.¹⁰ Thus, the *floating gap* Vansina was talking about is “filled in” and, paradoxically, becomes a tenable marker of past events out of which the Bayash derive meaning and create their identity.

For the Bayash, assuming an identity and constructing a past becomes an issue just as for any other Roma or non-Roma group. They must “solve” problems of different amplitudes: they are considered Gypsies by the surrounding population, they speak Romanian, live in Serbia, Croatia or Bulgaria and are rejected both by Romanians and by Serbs/Croats/Bulgarians. Thus, as in the case of Roma in general, when the Bayash seek a preferred identity their search is directed towards another minority which has a higher social status and they distance themselves from another, more inferior – as they see it – community.

Returning to the etiological legends, we must say that they aim at explaining things that otherwise do not have a logical explanation or cannot be explained at all. When the Bayash talk about the past of their community, the effort to give a meaning even to absurd or irrational things is an attempt to affirm and defend their own existence, an attempt to create a place in the history which has ignored them for so long. The eclectic nature of this process of imagining the past is heralded by the fact that it is a regular stage of development of the historical thinking of each nation. Even if most of the times the information offered by the legends is not valid on the reality level, it survives on the level of possibility and in the world of tradition, because the members of the Bayash community do not doubt they are true. Their stories can serve as an excellent exemplification of the way in which the mechanisms of myth creation function in today’s world. On the basis of incomplete data, memories, fragments of oral history, myths of foundation, etiological legends, old and new historical or geographical evidence, the Bayash try to “fill in” the huge gap in their past and to articulate their identity. Nevertheless, we must consider the

¹⁰ Marija Ilić, in her study on the oral memory of the Serbs in Szigetcsép (Hungary), explains that some events which do not belong either to the legendary or to the recent past can become part of the cultural memory due to the importance the community assigns to them (Ilić 2010).

fact that these processes of myth creation are influenced by a number of external factors coming from the macro society – among them there is also the academic work of the specialists, whose writings and ideas penetrate quickly into the Bayash environment. Thus, the issue of the moral responsibility of scholars to the target (objective) of their study must be brought to the forefront. It might easily be that the researchers' interest and the pressure of the surrounding communities led the Bayash to want to reconstruct or imagine their past.

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Анамарија Сореску-Маринковић

Бањаши – измишљање прошлости, стварање идентитета

Кључне речи:

Бањаши су мала етничка заједница са румунским матерњим језиком, која живи на територији Србије, Хрватске, Мађарске, Босне и Херцеговине и Бугарске, а у мањем броју – и у Македонији, Грчкој, Украјини, Словачкој и Словенији. Такође, живе и у другим европским земљама, као што су Немачка, Аустрија, Француска, Шпанија, Португал, Италија и Кипар, у које су стигли као гастарбајтери, легални или илегални мигранти, или као избеглице. Бањаши не говоре ромски, а већина њих је двојезична или вишејезична: активно се служе матерњим језиком, већинским језиком средине у којој живе, а гастарбајтери говоре и језик средине у којој раде. У већини случајева,

Кључне речи:

Бањаши, Роми, идентитет, легенде о пореклу, народна етимологија, Балкан

Бањаша је термин који користе истраживачи да би означили ову заједницу, мада многи Бањаша сами не знају или не користе овај термин (у Бугарској се користи термин *Рудар*, у Босни – *Каравласи*, у Молдавији – *Лингурари*, у Хрватској – *Бајаша* итд). Због полуномадског начина живота, менталитета и физичких карактеристика, други сматрају Бањаше Ромима, а у неким случајевима се они сами изјашњавају као Роми или Цигани. До скоро су чували традиционално занимање – прераду дрвета, због чега су често називани *кашикарима* или *вретенарима*, иако је ово занимање данас скоро нестало.

Ова студија се заснива на разговорима са Бањашима широм Србије (2003–2008, 150 сати снимљеног аудио-материјала), у три бањашка насеља из Барање и у једном из Међумурја, Хрватска (2006, 20 сати), и у пет насеља у североисточној Бугарској (2008, 20 сати). Током ових антрополошких и лингвистичких истраживања, разговори су вођени углавном са старијим Бањашима, а сви разговори су снимани. Већина разговора је била усмерена ка реконструкцији традиционалне културе, али су такође снимане и дигресије, коментари и слободни разговори учесника. Саговорници су охрабривани да причају о себи и о својој заједници, почевши од идеје да аутобиографски разговори могу да покажу како се саговорници односе према сопственој заједници, сећању и прошлости, како они виде себе саме у односу на друге, како их други виде, и како ово виђење споља утиче на њихов дискурс.

Скоро свака заједница Бањаша има своју етиолошку легенду, коју обично не познају ни друге бањашке заједнице, а ни већинско становништво. Другим речима, Бањаша као целина не функционишу као *мнемоничка заједница*, чим немају јаку заједничку *мнемоничку традицију*. Ове расуте легенде не следе један, општи модел, и иако се могу често срести на терену, знатно се разликују од места до места.

Бањаша у Србији

У недостатку било каквих докумената који би потврдили њихов долазак у Србију, скоро свака група Бањаша има сопствену етиолошку легенду. Свим овим легендама заједничко је то што се сматра да су, у већини случајева, два или три брата – преци Бањаша („прави хероји колонисти“), и да су у далекој прошлости дошли са Карпата или прешли Дунав. Када желе да нагласе румунско порекло, Бањаша спомињу топониме из Румуније који су се могли сачувати у заједничком памћењу (прави *lieux de memoire*), мада често умећу и разне друге оријентире, као што су Грузија, Русија или Индија, што води до бизарне контаминације хетерогенског географског знања. „Индијска теза“ о пореклу ромског народа, која је била од великог значаја међу самим Ромима, такође је продирала и у бањашку средину, па се део њихових легенди структурише по том моделу. Други начин на који Бањаша граде етиолошке легенде користи народну етимологију којом објашњавају етноним групе. Каравласи из Босне – од којих су се многи иселили у јужну Србију – користе

народну етимологију како би везали порекло и рану историју заједнице за Карађорђа и за важне тренутке у српској историји.

Бањаша у Хрватској

„Идентитетски дискурс“ Бањаша у Барањи често укључује легенде о пореклу које су сличне онима код Бањаша у Србији, имају знатан дијапазон шаблона и варијанти и, у већини случајева, приповедају како су њихови преци дошли из Румуније, или спомињу неки географски репер (град, планину, реку итд.) из ове земље. Међутим, истраживања из Међимурја су показала да Бањаша свој језик не доводе у везу са румунским језиком, нити пак да Румунију наводе као земљу свог порекла. Неки чак нису знали да таква земља постоји. Овакав став може да се објасни чињеницом да данашња Хрватска нема границе са данашњом Румунијом, а места одакле су Бањаша дошли била су тада делови Аустроугарске. Свест о румунском пореклу није постојала код Бањаша, нити она постоји данас.

Рудари у Бугарској

Рудари у Бугарској сматрају да су „прави Власи“ или „најстарији Румуни“, а према једној од чешћих легенди, Рудари воде порекло из „дрвног краљевства“ на Балкану: после његовог уништења, део њих је прешао Дунав и основао румунски народ, док су њихови прави преци, данашњи Рудари, остали у Бугарској. У неким случајевима Рудари су почели да прибегавају квазиисторијском знању и наивним истраживањима која тврде да су Рудари исто што и данашњи Румуни. Такође, морамо споменути да је 1998. основана политичка партија Рудара – „Родољубје“, чији лидер сматра да термин *Рудари* не потиче од *руде*, него од *рода*, пошто су, према његовом мишљењу, Рудари потомци првих бугарских племена. Такође, део Рудара се декларише као Трачани, док део наглашава своје румунско порекло и сматра да су побегли из Румуније преко Дунава због округлости румунских бољара.

На основу теренске грађе снимљене у неколико бањашких заједница у Србији, Хрватској и Бугарској, ауторка ове студије истражује начин на који саговорници покушавају да створе идентитет и да измишљају или креирају прошлост своје заједнице, користећи етиолошке легенде које комбинују ново и старо историјско или географско знање. Ауторка показује да је конструисање прошлости за Бањаше једнако проблематично као и за било коју другу ромску или не-ромску заједницу на Балкану. Тако, Бањаша морају да „реше“ разне проблеме: већинска популација их сматра Циганима, они говоре румунски, живе у Србији, Хрватској или Бугарској, а Румуни, као и Срби, Хрвати или Бугари, не сматрају их својима. Према томе, када Бањаша траже преферирани идентитет, тај идентитет је идентитет мањине која има виши социјални статус.

Процес измишљања прошлости је нормална етапа у развоју историјског размишљања сваке нације. Иако подаци које пружају бањашке легенде о пореклу често нису валидни у реалној равни, они преживљавају у равни могућности и у свету традиције, зато што чланови бањашке заједнице не сумњају да су они истинити. „Реалност“ коју приче саговорника пружају конструисана је са циљем да им дефинише идентитет и да га брани. Њихове приче могу служити као одличан пример за начин на који функционишу механизми формирања мита у данашњем свету. На основу непотпуних података, успомена, фрагмената усмене историје, митова и легенди о пореклу, старих и нових историјских или географских доказа, Бањаша покушавају да надоместе огроман јаз у својој прошлости и да артикулишу своју историју и идентитет. Ипак, морамо имати на уму да на процесе креирања мита утичу разни спољни фактори из макрозаједнице, међу којима је и научни рад истраживача, чије идеје често продиру у бањашку средину.