



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

1126 EAST 59TH STREET  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637

(773) 702-2551; FAX (773) 702-4503

E-mail: [susangal@uchicago.edu](mailto:susangal@uchicago.edu)

October 28, 2024

Evaluation of the Dissertation of **Camilla SALVATORE**

Charles University, Prague and Université Paris Cité

Title: **"We speak clean Gypsy, I am a pure Roma": Performing difference through linguistic and artistic practices in Kotel, Bulgaria.**

**SUMMARY:**

Camilla Salvatore has submitted a dissertation that is a substantial and original work based on thorough and extended fieldwork on site, at the town of Kotel in Bulgaria, with a Roma minority there. The preparation for this field research required not only Ms Salvatore's first language (Italian) but also Bulgarian and the continuing effort to learn Romani. In addition, the language of the dissertation is English (more comment on that below). Salvatore provides a more detailed description than is usual of her entry into the fieldsite, her personal relations with her interlocutors, the various institutional and personal venues in which she interacted with them and the dates of entry and exit and re-entry into the field. Much of the participant observation took place at a school for small children, most of whom were Roma as were the 10-12 women who were their teachers, care-takers and social workers. The interactions with these women and interviews provide an 'ethnography of speaking' of this school and its wider context. In addition, the dissertation describes in detail (a) the imagination of the history of the town through stories told by selected town-dwellers; (b) a festival that celebrates the ethnic diversity of this town and serves as a tourist attraction as well as a source of income for town-dwellers; (c) music performances by local and other musicians and how they understand the genres with which they work. A conclusion closes the dissertation.

The **Introduction** is an overview of the argument as well as a review of the literature in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics to which the argument contributes. Salvatore has done a good job, immersing herself in the writings in this area

of research. She is familiar with the current theories and describes them well. The overall strategy is to analyze sociopolitical processes of Roma marginalization and discrimination through the analysis of linguistic practices and language ideologies.

The argument of the dissertation is laid out: There is a big difference between the monolingual ideology of the communist period and the current discourse/ideology about language. In the communist period, a monolingual regime was in effect. The several ethnicities of Kotel (and other similar towns) with Bulgarians, Roma, Turks, and Karakachans were expected to assimilate to Bulgarian, the official national language and culture, using only Bulgarian in public. In contrast, the current official ideology is one of 'multilingualism' and 'multiculturalism' in which the so-called ethnicities are to be recognized and their 'mother tongues' and 'cultural heritage' to be usable in public, despite continuing stigma of Roma practices and identity. This creates a dilemma for Roma.

Their strategies for handling this contradiction, as evident in different venues, form the overall theme of the dissertation. The analysis shows that Roma use the communist-era concept of 'purity' (*chisto*) of language as a 'shifter.' Roma distinguish themselves from Bulgarians via linguistic and other signs (and are so distinguished by Bulgarians). At one level, since Roma codeswitch between Romani and Bulgarian, they are seen by self and others as unpure. But Kotel Roma distinguish themselves from Roma in other villages/towns as purer than those in other towns. They claim superiority on the basis of education, musicianship and other features. This is also, ironically, an assimilation to Bulgarians, since Kotel Roma claim -- like Bulgarians -- to be 'pure.' This argument is supported by evidence that Salvatore analyzes through the semiotic frameworks of indexicality, language ideology and performance; also relevant are enregisterment, iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure in the way that Roma in Kotel voice opinions about their identity, their practices and positions (and stigma) in town and especially their language use. Concepts of languaging and performance gain a particular importance in the evidence, as the Festival of Ethnicities is a major event described, as is the performance of music.

**Chapter 1:** Details Salvatore's schedule of fieldtrips, her institutional connections, her personal decisions about fieldwork practices (where she lived, where she worked at the school) the general history of the town and its geographical layout, the

methods she used for transcription of the recordings she was able to make. It is refreshing that Salvatore is frank about the limitations of her knowledge of Romani (a perfectly understandable limit, under the circumstances) and the difficulties of engagement with people who are discriminated against. This is familiar from much of anthropological fieldwork. She specifies that some of her interlocutors helped in deciphering recordings.

**Chapter 2: History** Salvatore presents three phases of Kotel's history that are recalled by current town-dwellers and are connected to current dilemmas and difficulties. The Turkish invasion and Kotel's position in the Ottoman Empire; the end of WW II and the beginning of communist rule; the fall of communism and the era of 'democracy.' She describes the disillusion and distress at current conditions and the nostalgia towards the communist period through narratives of her interlocutors, paying particular attention to ideologies of time. The concept of 'purity' is here discussed as relevant in the ethnic as well as linguistic domains. The imagination of the Ottoman period, for instance, as one where Kotel had no Turkish inhabitants, thus spoke "pure" Bulgarian.

**Chapter 3: Festival** This chapter describes the Festival of the Ethnicities, Colors and Kotel Carpet. It charts how participants evaluate whether and how Kotel is a "successful model for partnership" of ethnicities. The festival is an event organized by the municipality since 2016, in which Kotel residents play-act the four ethnicities present in town, creating "cities" or neighborhoods in which participants are dressed in and perform 'traditional' (as in Romantic stereotyped) activities, foods, etc. This is visited by many from the region as well as foreigners and the locals are in a position to make money to supplement their income. The festival is simultaneously a 'site of ideological work' as well as a complex of performances. There is a relationship here to the discourse of UNESCO and the EU on heritage sites; the mayor's speech is analyzed as are the practices on show. "Authenticity" and "tradition" are discussed by Salvatore, citing literature on these matters in recent anthropological writings. She finds that people both internalize stereotypes of ethnicities, but also use them strategically to become politically visible. The photographs are effective in conveying the festival's messages.

**Chapter 4: Ideologies of purity (resisting and reproducing)** Organized around the school (CRUD) and its workers where Salvatore was employed for part of her

fieldwork, this chapter gives capsule biographies of the teachers and social workers and then analyzes the interviews she did with them, concluding that the old monolingual ideology is reproduced in this school. But the women also use the shifter of 'pure,' 'speaking pure' and related expressions, with diverse implications. This is, then, the chapter that is most directly about the overarching thesis of how 'purity' is used as a fractal indexical, enabling speakers to display their agency in self-identifying, self-positioning. The differing terms for 'Roma' available in the town are discussed. "[B]y re-appropriating the adjective "*chisto*"[pure] and applying it to a new term of reference (no longer Bulgarian but the linguistic practices called "*Tsiganski*"), my interlocutors set up — through a process of "fractal recursivity" — a difference with Roma living in other town or villages." In some contexts this means they speak in a more "Bulgarized" way, while others speak more mixed, by using Turkish words. It seems this "pure" Bulgarian makes them "full citizens." But in other situations "pure" means a Romani language that has been lost. Salvatore concludes that: "my interlocutors, when reproducing the ideology of '*chisto*' are caught between assimilation and emancipation. She argues that resistance can emerge not only in metadiscourses about language, but in linguistic practices too.

**Chapter 5: Music and musicians, positioning (re-appropriation)** This chapter also focuses on performances, now by musicians. Kotel's musicians self-position in terms of the eras of history that were discussed in the first chapter. The communist period required the "purification" of Bulgarian music (as in other, neighboring states) removing supposedly Gypsy and Turkish elements. Salvatore integrates the theorizations of folklorists with that of linguistic anthropology. Discussing *chalga*, a genre that has been identified with Roma and became popular after the end of communism, enables Salvatore to see diverse uptakes of it by critics, musicians and scholars who argue that it is not Roma at all. Salvatore emphasizes the reflexivity about performance that characterizes her interviewees. The interlocutors, whatever ethnicity, re-appropriate the term *narodna* and claim to be able to create in many genres, including traditional national ones.

**EVALUATION:** In my view this dissertation is ready to be defended. It is impressive in the ethnographic portrait of the town of KOTEL, with the linguistic, artistic and educational practices of the Roma (and other) populations there. It presents evidence

from many sources (local newspapers, national discourse, interviews, observation) and puts together a set of arguments about the uses of concepts such as 'purity' (of language and culture) that are well related to Kotel's (and Bulgaria's) history, current political circumstances and language ideologies. Salvatore has made a valiant effort to integrate linguistic anthropological concepts with those from sociocultural anthropology. The familiarity with these literatures is laudable. The dissertation has an overall argument that is interesting and important, clarifying new evidence with linguistic anthropological concepts.

Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses. The *use* of concepts is often vague and imprecise, without enough direct connection to the evidence, weakening the analysis. The presentation of the data could be better organized. The arguments sometimes lose their force over many pages of repetition and excessively long transcripts. The transcripts are analyzed mostly as matters of content. If only content is relevant, then summaries would be adequate. If the *form* of the responses/conversations make a difference (e.g. a pattern of specific indexicalities, parallelisms, alternation of terms), then we should have these together, demonstrating how they work. On the one hand, English is Salvatore's fourth language, and so the articulateness of the text is impressive. On the other hand, there are almost no paragraph breaks. Thus the text lacks logical organization at the level of connectors, in steps that move the argument from one to another specific analytical point. The reader does not have enough guidance within chapters. This means the very interesting material deserves editing and revision at this level as it moves to publication.



Susan Gal  
Mae and Sidney G. Metzl Distinguished Service Professor  
Anthropology and Linguistics  
Director: Center for the Study of Communication and Society