

THE GYPSY CEMETERY IN DONJI KOMREN

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Abstract. *The typology of the Romany cemeteries is that the Romanies are buried at (a) their own Gypsy cemetery that is physically separated from the so-called Serbian one, (b) their own cemetery, the so-called Gypsy cemetery that is physically connected to the so-called Serbian one, (c) the so-called Serbian cemetery together with the other citizens, and (d) some other cemetery outside their place of residence.*

The people of Donji Komren are not to blame for having a separate Gypsy cemetery since, on one hand, the Romanies were always in recent or - sometimes for centuries - in the far past buried at a separate and from their place of residence distant terrain for at least three reasons: (a) severe segregation and stigmatization of the majority, (b) the internal characteristics of their own culture and their culture of death, and (c) turbulent historical events. On the other hand, except for the burials outside their place of residence (type d), the other types of cemeteries (a, b, and c) are utterly legitimate and desirable. The reason for this might be that the first Romany who died in Donji Komren was buried - at some time between the first two world wars - on the northern-western side of a small hill named "Grobljišta" for inherent reasons peculiar to the Romany culture of death. This might have been a coincidence. Or maybe the reason for this was his stigmatization by the citizens of the village. This can be only guessed at since there is no written evidence. Neither is there reliable memory of the citizens.

Key words: *Typology of Romany Cemeteries, Romany Culture of Death*

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTARY

For the sake of truth, let's repeat: are we among the first ones or even the first ones in the Yugoslav sociology (sociology of religion and the sociology of Romanies) and in romology who have opened up the issue of the **Romany culture of death** (Đorđević and

Todorović, 1999; Đorđević and Todorović, 2000)?¹ The term includes the very act of dying, the way of burial (burial customs), the grave cult and the types of the Romany cemeteries; in other words, it is a complex and in many aspects a significant phenomenon. The central position within it is taken by *death* which is, from the sociological point of view, regarded as "a specific social act representing the culmination of a multitude of group and social phenomena, the *truthful picture* of a concrete community and culture *that reveals to us, for instance, a set of economic and class, layer and status, custom and religious, ethnic and racial relations*" (Đorđević and Todorović, 1999:3). Starting with the investigation of the culture of death and tending towards an overall view of the Romanies' fate, we have, in our previous research, approached in more details to the study of the Romanies' cemeteries, more precisely, of the Romany Orthodox country "eternal houses."

For this purpose it was necessary to prepare a typology of the Romanies' cemeteries and to test it on a specific, somewhat limited geographic-cultural space such as the region of the city of Niš. The typology was made by D. B. Đorđević who took care about the fact that the cemeteries are a *sociological reality*, a specific "*mirror of the people*" and that they can demonstrate the majority population's attitude towards the Romanies. **The typology of the Romanies' cemeteries** is the following, namely, the Romanies are buried at (A) *their own so-called Gypsy cemetery that is physically separated from the so-called Serbian one*, (B) *their own cemetery, the so-called Gypsy cemetery that is physically connected to the so-called Serbian one*, (C) *the so-called Serbian cemetery together with the other citizens*, and (D) *some other cemetery outside their place of residence*. The typology assumes, as seen, four variants of the Romanies' burial.

At the same time, like many other typologies, the one we have proposed - not intentionally, but due to the assumed impossibility - cannot include transition cases and nuances so that it is always necessary to enclose to it the description of a given incident. "The case of Rujnik" as an example of the extreme lack of any culture of death - is documented in the study entitled "*A Maple Tree Above the Head - Classical Faith and Romany Orthodox Country Cemeteries*". "**The Case of Donji Komren**" is another kind of the violation of the typology. It is covered up briefly in the above-mentioned publication; namely, it says that "Likewise in Donji Komren in Niš which is another case showing the way the things are in *many* rural settlements, the Orthodox Serbs and the Orthodox Romanies are buried separately, though in the last few years - beside keeping in function the separate Donji Komren Gypsy cemetery - there are Romanies' graves that can be spotted on until recently ethnically pure Serbian cemetery" (Đorđević and Todorović, 1999:24). This is the most recent reason why we are reconsidering the issue and why the Gypsy cemetery in Donji Komren deserves so much attention including a scientific paper about it. A much older reason is more important: the Donji Komren Gypsy cemetery (further on: DGC) has in fact moved us to devote a part of our sociological activity to the study of the Romany culture of death. Since we have spent all our lives in this small settlement and cherished the picture of its nice but separate Gypsy cemetery we have

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always asked ourselves why it must be like that and if it is the same at other places and regions. Therefore, we feel obliged to search for some answers by a documentary story.

PHOTO OF THE CEMETERY (AND BY OBJECTIVE)

EARLY REPORTS. The Donji Komren settlement that used to be a village and today is a suburban settlement of Niš has already been the subject of considerable sociological-ethnological studies. First the results were reported on in two papers, namely *"Contribution to the Sociological Study of the Population, the Social Structure and the Culture of Donji Komren"* and *"Material Organization of the Donji Komren Area"*, namely the early writings of D. B. Đorđević (1977:97-107; 1978:83-87) and then in the encyclopedia item by J. Ćirić (1995:70-71) *"Komren"* and, finally, in M. Radaković's chronicle (1997) *"Donji Komren"*.

The Donji Komren cemeteries, the Serbian and the Gypsy ones, were given less attention within the above-mentioned research studies. D. B. Đorđević (1978:87) only mentions former controversies: "There is an interesting controversy between the inhabitants of the old and the new parts of the settlement (former settlement of Donji Komren, today "B. Bjegović", editor's note) concerning the cemetery. The inhabitants of the new part of the settlement bury their dead at the cemetery of the old part of the settlement though the resolutions brought about by the Municipality Assembly and the Urban Planning Institute they are obliged to do that at the central cemetery of Niš. However, they do not do that because of high material costs. The inhabitants do not mind it. Still, they do not want - and this is interesting - to participate in the cemetery maintenance and to buy new burial places needed for enlarging the cemetery. Even the inhabitants of the 'Ratko Jović' (former Novi Komren - editor's note) bury their dead at this cemetery." M. Radaković (1997:36) while devoting two-thirds of a page to the cemetery issue, also speaks about the same controversy: "The cemetery equipment and maintenance costs are to be covered up by the old part of Donji Komren with an occasional help from the Donji Komren Settlement. The Novi Komren appears only as a user that can hardly be denied due to family ties and the Donji Komren origin of some of its inhabitants. All this has contributed to the fact that the cemetery has become narrow, packed up and insufficiently kept in order."

Yet, for the first time only in brief, M. Radaković (1997:36) starts the story about the "Komren Case", that is, about the DGC: "On the west side of the hill Grobljište there is a Gypsy cemetery with some thirty burial places and a large free area for the burial. The real needs of the Romanies of Donji Komren are considerably less. Judging by the monuments it can be seen that the cemetery came into being somewhere between the two wars. The shape of the monuments and the inscriptions show that the cemetery is used for the burial of Orthodox Romanies." The story is then continued in the book *"A Maple Tree..."* by our objections to M. Radaković to his embarrassingly "dry" description of the Gypsy cemetery that fails to stress its beauty and arrangement; then the book proceeds to the typological determination and underlining of the invariant case.

TYOLOGICAL DETERMINATION. The DGC belongs to the Romany Orthodox country cemeteries of the type "A", that is, to *the so-called Gypsy cemetery that is physically separated from the so-called Serbian one* (Fig. 1). It is not an exception

in any case - this is the second form of the Romanies' burials in the region of Niš (32,25%), just behind the type "C" (46,77%) and just in front of the type "B" (19,35%) and "D" (1,61%). It should also be known that out of the overall number of cemeteries (20), denoted as the type "A", beside one that is common, namely Kunovica/Ravni Do, there are ten that have died out. It means that Donji Komren belongs to a group of a dozen of villages and suburban settlements of Niš that have still preserved the practice of separate burial of Romanies. This might be strange to some people of Donji Komren, but it is enough to have a look at the neighboring settlement of Gornji Komren and see that their Gypsies are buried together with the Serbs.

The people of Donji Komren are not to blame for having a separate Gypsy cemetery since, on one hand, the Romanies were always in recent or - sometimes for centuries - in the far past buried at a separate and from their place of residence distant terrain for at least three reasons: (a) severe segregation and stigmatization of the majority, (b) the internal characteristics of their own culture and their culture of death, and (c) turbulent historical events. On the other hand, except for the burials outside their place of residence (type d), the other types of cemeteries (a, b, and c) are utterly legitimate and desirable. The reason for this might be that the first Romany who died in Donji Komren was buried - at some time between the first two world wars - on the northern-western side of a small hill named "Grobļjišta" for inherent reasons peculiar to the Romany culture of death. This might have been a coincidence. Or maybe the reason for this was his stigmatization by the citizens of the village. This can be only guessed at since there is no written evidence. Neither is there reliable memory of the citizens.

Even more important than solving the above riddle is to realize that the present inhabitants of Donji Komren have a very correct attitude towards the acceptable variants of the Romanies' eternal houses. As determined by D. B. Đorđević in the recent public opinion research (see his introductory remarks to this publication), the people of Donji Komren, beside supporting a separate Gypsy cemetery (30,3%), also vote for, to a high percentage (26,7%; 33,3%), two other desired solutions, namely, for the mixed burial and for a special location that is physically connected with the Serbian one. Though there is a small number of those who would bury the Romanies outside their place of residence, this fact is still much worrying.



Fig. 1. Gypsy Cemetery at Donji Komren

TYOLOGICAL DEVIATIONS. Regarding the different burial of the Romanies it is written in the "*Maple Tree...*" that "the principal explanation supports the warning that it is a matter of *free choice* of every ethnic group, its segment and individual how and where it is going to 'plant a maple tree above the head'. The Romanies in general, as well as the Orthodox Romanies and other ones can make a choice for one of the following welcome variants - that should be provided for - and their choice should be made freely with no compulsion at all. In the villages of Niš this happens in four cases. Namely, the Orthodox Romanies a) ask and obtain a separate and physically isolated place (Hum, Donji Komren), b) insist upon a separate place which is physically a part of the Serbian (Jelašnica), c) are buried together with others (Brzi Brod and others), and d) move from the so-called Gypsy cemeteries to the ethnically pure Serbian cemeteries (Donji Komren)" (Đorđević and Todorović, 1999:73). In Donji Komren there are three examples for the last variant, namely, for moving out from the typological form a) which makes it correct to speak about the "Donji Komren case" (One of these days, behind Dejan Savić, there is the latest grave of Memet Arslanović /1922-2000/ who is obviously a Muslim Romany who converted to Orthodoxy and who is not from Donji Komren and the Donji Komren Settlement (more about it in M. Radaković's paper/ which could be the third example -Fig. 4)



Fig. 2. First Example



Fig. 3. Second example



Fig. 4. Third Example

CONFESSIONAL BACKGROUND AND CUSTOMS. The cemetery is purely Orthodox as can be spotted immediately starting from the symbols on the entrance gate to the monuments themselves where the cross dominates (Fig. 5). At the burials just like in the year cycle devoted to the diseased most of the Orthodox customs are practiced.

The truth is that this has been practiced before, but today the Romanies of Donji Komren are not among those of their compatriots who collect the food and other things left on the graves for the souls of the diseased. They even condemn the city Romanies who collect the food even from the Romanies' graves.

In this identification with the Orthodox confessional background and regarding their cemetery they even exaggerate. Almost everyone says that they would never allow the burial of their compatriots of Islam faith. This is a firm decision made by the members of the Cemetery Committee. The most frequent justification is found in the fact that in Niš, next to the airport, there is a large Gypsy cemetery for the Muslim Romanies and that there are no Muslims in Donji Komren and in the Settlement of Donji Komren. However, this eagerness can make them liable to mistakes; thus, it has happened that they have refused to allow for the burial of Memet Arslanović who took to Orthodoxy and whose grave is to be found on the Serbian cemetery.

MONUMENT COMPLEX. The general impression is that, not only because of the coating, the prewar and postwar monuments somewhere up to the seventies are more interesting in all the aspects of the monument work (Fig. 6). The monument complex is, regarding the age of a group of monuments, very well preserved. Out of thirty-nine monuments only one has fallen, is destroyed and the diseased cannot be identified (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5. An Older Monument with a Cross

Likewise, on several old and already inclined monuments it is hard to recognize all the carved data about the diseased. It seems there is no order in placing burial places and stones, namely seventeen, mostly older monuments are face-turned towards the West though the bodies of the diseased are properly turned towards the East. In the referential literature we could not find examples for this interesting phenomenon so that the initial explanation leads into three directions. These mistakes are made either because of ignorance and carelessness towards the eternal house of the diseased or the Orthodox rule about the grave composition was accepted later or maybe, on the contrary, the reasons were quite pragmatic - namely, if the face is west-oriented then most of the customs could be performed without moving around the grave location and stepping upon the grave itself.



Fig. 6. Coated Monument with the Carved-in Cross



Fig. 7. A Fallen-down Monument

At the cemetery the most recent grave is that of Verka Savić (1940-1999), while the oldest three monuments date from 1938 (Smilja Stojanović, 1938, her husband Milutin; Natalija Stojanović, 1912-1938, her husband Milutin and Radoslav Stojanović, 1925-1938, and his father Milutin). In fact, there are four monuments whose inscriptions cannot be read due to the ruined state; they were probably built before 1938. Strange in its simplicity, that is, in a tombstone of almost square shape is the monument to the five-month old baby, Maja Bajramović (15. 6. 1995 - 30. 11. 1995, Father Vlasta and Mother Snežana). An example of properly kept and a nice burial place is that of Ljubinka Ramić (1947-1993, husband Živorad and son Nikola) (Fig. 9). There is even a small garden planted behind it.

The cemetery is well taken care of by the Cemetery Committee formed fifteen years ago. It is interesting that it is an informal body mostly consisting of younger people or middle-aged ones.



Fig. 8. Monument to Maja Bajramović



Fig. 9. Burial Place of Ljubinka Ramić

INSCRIPTIONS. The data about the diseased are most often written legibly in the Cyrillic alphabet though not always in the gramatically correct way or completely. In general at the older monuments the birth year is lacking while there is always the year of death and that the diseased lived for this or that period of time. The explanation for this is simple: our ancestors, not only Romany ones, very often did not know for sure their year of birth since it was not recorded and remembered; it was mainly talked about; however, as with all the rumors, Mother says one thing, Grandma another, one year is recorded in the church books and another in the personal identification papers - the only reliable thing seems to be one's claim that he, for instance, is about eighty years old. A year or two more or less does not mean anything.

Unlike the Donje Komren Serbian cemetery that is crowded with kitsch epitaphs there are no such things here. More precisely, there is a lonely one on the monument to Ljubinka Ramić saying (Fig. 10): *"And only a few days before the hour of death there was a little family living happily."*



Fig. 10. Epitaph on the Monument to Ljubinka Ramić

LIST OF THE DISEASED (in alphabetic order)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Bajramović Maja (1995-1995) | 20. Stojanović Radoslav (1925-1938) |
| 2. Grozdanović Dragica (1931-1990) | 21. Stojanović Slobodan (1929-1949) |
| 3. Ibrić Nikola (1902-1969) | 22. Stojanović Persa (1911-1959) |
| 4. Merđić Vukadin (1924-1993) | 23. Stojanović Milutin (1906-1976) |
| 5. Merđić Vidosava (1924-1995) | 24. Stojanović Svetislav (1937-1981) |
| 6. Mestanović Vladimir (1932-1981) | 25. Stojanović Budimka (1908-1987) |
| 7. Mikić Miodrag (1929-1993) | 26. Stojanović Dragutin (1909-1989) |
| 8. Mikić Radovan (1937-1996) | 27. Stojanović Ilija (1939-1989) |
| 9. Mladenović Milka (1943-1989) | 28. Stojanović Branislav (1946-1998) |
| 10. Musić Denča (1936-1996) | 29. Usainović Mladen (1912-1942) |
| 11. Osmanović Šanko (1938-1973) | 30. Usainović Zagorka (1908-1980) |
| 12. Osmanović Borisav (1919-1988) | 31. Usainović Živojin (1919-1991) |
| 13. Osmanović Goran (1963-1993) | 32. Usainović Stana (1927-1993) |
| 14. Pletikosić Mihajlo (1942-1997) | 33. Usainović Varadinka (1922-1994) |
| 15. Rakić Desanka (1896-1972) | 34. Uskoković Stojan (1937-1978) |
| 16. Ramić Ljubinka (1947-1993) | 35. Uskoković Jelica (1941-1991) |
| 17. Savić Vera (1940-1999) | 36. Uskoković Ljiljana (1962-1996) |
| 18. Stojanović Smilja (19..-1938) | 37. Čukić Milun (1909-1978) |
| 19. Stojanović Natalija (1912-1938) | 38. Čukić Olga (1921-1997) |

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Gypsy cemetery at Donji Komren that belongs to the "A" type of the Romany Orthodox country cemeteries with invariant instances is purely Orthodox. It was founded, judging from legible data on the oldest monuments, somewhere between the two world wars. It is a small one with only 39 monuments and forty graves; it is well-managed and maintained with standard monument complex in which several old nice monuments at the special locations can be singled out; there are no underground waters. All in all, it can serve as a model to other cemeteries of the environment majority population.

Spatially, it can fulfill for quite a long time the needs of the Romanies of Donji Komren and the Donji Komren (Branko Bjegović) Settlement. *Its perspective is triple:* 1) it can remain and survive as a separate Gypsy cemetery which is not in any case unacceptable if it is the expression of the Romanies' free will, 2) it can be connected with the local Serbian cemetery which is almost entirely filled-in if the majority population decides - if it finds it useful - to spread around hillish and untilted areas and not at the expense of vineyards and plowed fields, and 3) it can be preserved, that is, it can be allowed to die out like the Serbian one if the large regional cemetery in the region of Slatina in the Gornji Komren-Rujnik area is built.

No matter what happens, that is, regardless of the variant chosen by the Romanies, the local population and the authorities of the city of Niš, it is necessary to respect at all times and at all places the Romany culture of death which is Orthodox-oriented here just as it is necessary to express a genuine affinity for an intercultural way of life.

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DONJOKOMRENSKO CIGANSKO GROBLJE

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Tipologija romskih grobalja glasi, tj. Romi se sahranjuju na: (A) sopstvenom, tzv. ciganskom groblju koje je fizički odvojeno od tzv. srpskog, (B) sopstvenom, tzv. ciganskom groblju koje je fizički spojeno sa tzv. srpskim, (V) tzv. srpskom groblju, pomešano sa ostalim meštanima, (G) drugom groblju, van domicilnog mesta.

Donjokomrenčanima ne treba upisivati u greh postojanje izdvojenog DCG-a, jer, sa jedne strane, Romi su se u bliskoj i, ponegde vekovima, dalekoj prošlosti svagda sahranjivali na odvojenom i od boravišta udaljenom terenu iz, najmanje, tri razloga: a) oštre segregacije i stigmatizacije većinskog okruženja, b) unutrašnjih odlika sopstvene kulture i kulture smrti, i v) burnih društveno-istorijskih dešavanja; i, sa druge, sem pogreba van mesta življenja (tip "G"), ostali su tipovi grobalja ("A", "B", "V") sasvim legitimni i poželjni. Možda je, tako, i prvi umrli donjokomrenski Rom sahranjen, tamo negde između I i II svetskog rata, na severozapadnoj strani brdašca "Grobljišta" iz inherentnih pobuda, svojstvenih romskoj kulturi smrti, možda je odlučivala čista slučajnost, a možda je u igri bilo i žigosanje od strane žitelja sela. O tome se jedino da nagađati s obzirom da nema pisanih tragova i pouzdanog pamćenja seljana.

Ključne reči: *tipologija romskih grobalja, romska kultura smrti*