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in the Cultural Practices of Young People**

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## SLOVENSKÝ NÁRODOPIS / SLOVAK ETHNOLOGY

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*A piece of Shelter 307. Photo: Marta Rovira-Martínez*

BACK COVER  
*A panoramic view of Barcelona from Turó de la Rovira. Photo: Judit Castellví  
Guided visit into the Bunker of Turó de la Rovira. Photo: Marta Rovira-Martínez*

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The author comes up with an intriguing conclusion, i.e. the adoption of other peoples' cultural realities, in this case festivals, contributes to cultural unification: the cultural boundaries of ethnic and national festivals become blurred in the context of a globalising world and multicultural society. Younger interviewees recognise only the names of traditional festivals, but they fail to explain their meaning due to the lack of experience of participation. This leads to a certain backlash from society: on the one hand, people try to withdraw into themselves and experience festivals individually, while on the other hand, general interest in ethnic and national culture is growing.

Since the monograph has been published in Latvian, its circulation in a wider academic environment is limited. The monograph will be translated into Russian in the near future, but I would like to encourage all those interested to follow publications by the book's author which have already been or will be published in various academic journals in English.

**Acknowledgement:**

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**TATIANA ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ**  
**Marian Devotion Among the Roma in Slovakia: A Post-Modern Religious Response to Marginality**  
*Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, 166 p.*

Although Jesus had only one mother, and even though she is the only Virgin Mary, her mundane faces and the expressions of devotion to her have taken on a kaleidoscope of diversity through time and space in countless multitudes of different variations – as many as there are people and communities (national, ethnic, religious, regional...) that honour her. It is exactly this observation that the author and editor Tatiana Zachar Podolinská makes in the introductory study of the publication *Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-Communist Europe*, in which a number of authors examine the current diversity of the forms of Marian devotion in post-Communist countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, etc.) (Zachar Podolinská, Ed., 2019). This edition shows all the many ways that the Virgin Mary, in different cultures, answers the hunger for spirituality, gives a voice to unofficial religious interpretations, revitalizes and redefines old cult sites and creates new ones, calms conflicts and speaks in the name of marginalized individuals and communities. In the monograph under review the author Zachar Podolinská builds her study of Marian devotion among the Roma of Slovakia, on the above observation, deepening and supporting it with plentiful data from the field. The work explores how the Roma, as a multiple marginali-

zed community, cope with that marginalization by creating their own islands of “marginal centrality” and the role that the post-modern Virgin Mary plays in the internal processes of self-centralization.

The monograph is based on extensive multi-sited fieldwork among members of the Roma communities in Slovakia. It is the result of author’s long-term experience in the research of religiosity in Slovakia, in particular the religiosity of people belonging to Roma communities. The fieldwork material is supplemented with other available sources of data, principally those from the media.

The book consists of four chapters. In the first of these, entitled *Traces of the Virgin Mary in the modern world*, Zachar Podolinská presents a detailed review of the roots of the cult of the Virgin in the tradition, stressing the enigma that she is both a virgin and the mother of Jesus, which scholars have attempted to explain with comparisons to pre-Christian and non-Christian female deities of the Great Mother Goddess type. The Virgin Mary is traditionally experienced as a potent and miraculous protector and healer, whose mercy and power of healing is channelled and becomes effective through material objects (statues, icons and pictures) – the phenomenon of miraculous statues and icons is known the world over. Also in this chapter the author considers the role of the Virgin Mary in the context of the nation-building process – in many countries and at many times, she has become an important national symbol.

Particular attention is given to the many ethnicized and enculturated versions of the Virgin Mary. Marginalized individuals and communities, in the attempt to attain visibility and gain a voice, tend to adopt the transcendent and transethnic Virgin Mary so that she may become culturally and visually ‘one of them’ and aid them on their way “from the periphery to the centre”. Official religion excludes and silences versions of the Virgin Mary other than that which it espouses itself “ignoring the right to approach Mary, Jesus, and God with the eyes, tongues, and hearts of different cultures” (p. 16).

Tatiana Zachar Podolinská explains further how the Virgin Mary is perfectly accommo-

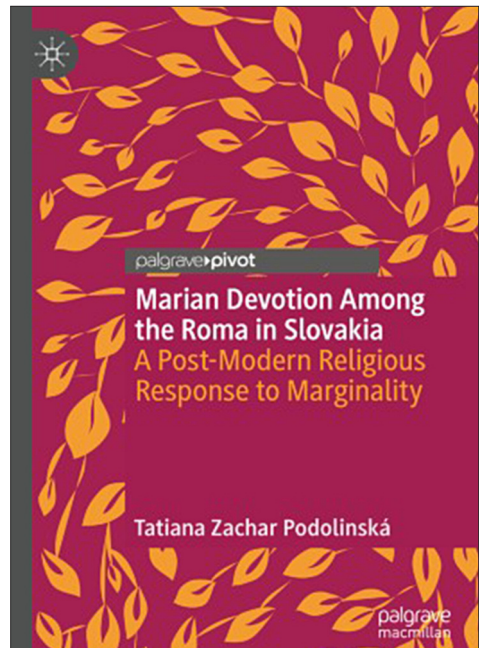
dated in the modern era. Under the floodlights of modernity, she remains traditional, preserving and developing pre-modern associations to heavenly phenomena, miracle-working springs, healing and similar. In modern secular societies she is seen as the miraculous healer in situations when official medicine proves unable to offer any solution. She offers a religious and spiritual answer to the secularism, consumerism and rationalism of modern society. The author continues, “Modern Mary is global and transnational. [...] In the twentieth century, the Virgin Mary literally conquered and colonised the entire globe by reaching all continents” (p. 19). In the unstable and unpredictable post-modern and post-secular world, in the early years of the twenty-first century, people still have a need for miracles and mysteries, and for the continuity of local and national traditions. In the post-communist countries in the 1990s there was a revitalization of religion, a “phenomenon of demonstrative resacralisation” (p. 30), as a response to the preceding period of enforced atheisation, which led to the restoration of the Church. The author explains that post-communist Mary “speaks to her people in the ‘national(istic)’ and ‘traditionalistic’ language, mobilising traditional, national, and conservative values against globalisation, westernisation, and liberal values” (p. 34). She concludes this chapter with the explanation that, in the post-communist countries, as in the West, Mary unites and blends pre-Christian female goddesses with the ultra-modern millennial and spiritual concepts of Mother of Earth and Mother of Universe. Moreover, Marys in the post-communist countries unify within themselves quite contradictory roles – representing ultra-conservative values, and at the same time ultra-modern alternative religious movements, charismatic, millennial or New-Age forms of spirituality, using apocalyptic or ethno-pagan esoteric vocabulary.

The next chapter, *Romani Christianity in Slovakia: religiosity of those on the periphery* is concerned with the contextualization and then the analysis of the religiosity of the Roma in Slovakia. Slovakia is a country with deeply rooted Marian devotion, dating back to the times of the mission of Cyril and Methodius (end of the

ninth century A.D). Zachar Podolinská explains that the Virgin Mary phenomenon is largely encountered on the social periphery, associated with liminality, vulnerability, laity, the poor and the colonized. In this context, as the author explains, the Virgin Mary in her specific form as the *Virgin Mary of Seven Sorrows*, has played an important role in the processes of the emancipation of the marginalized Slovak nation on its way “from the periphery to the centre” (p. 44). The author points to the standpoint of the Church according to which the struggle of the Slovaks for their own national form of the Virgin Mary culminated in 1927, ten years after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The author defines the Roma in Slovakia as a silent (without a voice) and invisible minority (see more Podolinská, 2017), which, for centuries, has remained on the social margins.<sup>1</sup> In this historical, social and religious context she researches Romani Christianity as a cultural translation of mainstream Christianity – a “unique system of unwritten rules and values that are fundamentally based on Christian faith in God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary” (p. 50). Most members of the Roma community are very religious, they practice their religion on a daily basis connected to the private sphere of home and family. In their understanding, what is most important is the intensity of religious experience (“faith in the heart”) and not frequency of attendance at church. They have a critical view of the traditional Christianity of the majority community, viewing it as very formal.

With great nuance Zachar Podolinská explains the complexity of the situation which the umbrella term Romani Christianity covers. She stresses that the content and type of religiosity among various Roma groups is highly heterogeneous; variation and bricolage are important characteristics and tendencies. Although the Catholic pattern of religiosity has dominated among the Slovakian Roma since 1989, Neo-Protestant and Pentecostal churches and movements have radically effected and changed many Roma communities, offering them a new



concept of ethnic and cultural translation of Christianity.

At the end of this chapter two possible methods of overcoming the marginalized position of the Roma in Slovakia are considered: the *Mary-centric one* – under token by the ethnicised and enculturated Virgin Mary within traditional Romani Christianity (Catholicism) and the *Mary-peripheric one* – within non-traditional Romani Christianity (Neo-Protestant and Romani Pentecostal churches and movements). The chapter ends with the question which of these has the potential to draw the Romani from “the periphery to the centre”, recalling that both lead to “marginal centrality”, offering the Roma dignity, but on the social margins (pp. 67–68).

The chapter *Marian Devotion among the Roma in Slovakia: Ethnicised and Enculturated Mary* focuses on Marian devotion in the concrete cultural context of the Roma communities in Slovakia. Acts of ‘appropriation’ of the Virgin Mary are examined in the context of traditional Romani Christianity, in particular acts of

1 There are numerous valuable studies in the Roma of Slovakia; here I would draw attention to: Podolinská, Hrustič, *Eds.*, 2016.

ethnisation and enculturation in which the 'White' Virgin Mary is ethnically 'transcribed' and culturally 'translated' to bring her closer and as such, render her better able to offer a fuller answer to their hopes and needs. The author recalls that during her fieldwork among members of the Roma community, she encountered a plethora of local and familial examples of transcription and translation of the Virgin Mary. However, certain features and elements of Marian devotion were also common to Roma communities spatially very distant from one another.

The author characterizes traditional Romani Christianity as Mary-centric. Members of the researched Roma communities are deeply attached to the Virgin Mary, visually represented in a multitude of pictures, reproductions, tapestries and similar. She is seen as the transcendent Mother of God, and in the fieldwork interviews, is often described using transethnic vocabulary and in the aesthetic categories of beauty.

Zachar Podolinská notes the critical attitude expressed by several members of the Roma community on the mainstream interpretation of the Virgin Mary as white-skinned. She records cases where the Virgin Mary is described as a beautiful Romani woman with dark skin and brown eyes, and describes the ethnicised depictions of Mary she encountered, with certain ethnic or racial characteristics which differed greatly from the habitual iconography of the Virgin Mary in the region of Eastern Slovakia. In this context the statement of one interlocutor is particularly significant. She was convinced that the Virgin Mary must be like her – dark-skinned with dark hair and eyes. When describing the colour of the Virgin's skin, and of her own, this interlocutor used the adjective "chocolate" (in a positive context, connecting the colour of their skin to the flavour and taste of chocolate). The phenomenon of the Chocolate Mary – the ethnicised and enculturated Romani Virgin Mary is, in its own way, a post-modern religious response to the pronounced marginalization of the Roma in Slovakia.

The final chapter of this book *Marian Apparitions among the Roma: From the Periphery to the Centre* turns to the question of the nu-

merous and increasingly frequent Marian apparitions among the Roma in the past few decades. The strengthening of Marian devotion among the Roma is closely connected to the post-communist rehabilitation and general re-strengthening of Marian devotion among the majority population of Slovakia. On the basis of her fieldwork and media analysis, the author examines the ways in which the Virgin communicates with the Roma, how they experience her and how they react to the apparitions, and also how representatives of official structures, both political and religious, and the media comment on local apparitions among the Roma. All of the apparitions detailed in the book had a specific context, but a common feature they all possess is that they occur in the private spaces of the household (on house walls, furniture, doors and stove doors) or in their immediate vicinity of the home. Carefully analysing their *emic* perspective, the diversity and often conflicted nature of individual viewpoints and experiences of those belonging to the researched community, the author concludes that the "way 'from the periphery to the centre' is definitely not simple or linear" (p. 140).

Roma religious culture is Mary-centric, but Mary's centrality has been seriously challenged in recent decades by the growing Neo-Protestant and Pentecostal movements at work in post-communist Slovakia, and directing their mission mainly towards the Roma community. These movements offer the Roma ethnic emancipation on a religious basis, calling for a break with the old "Gypsy story" laden with negative connotations. In this way they radically redefine traditional Romani Christianity. Zachar Podolinská directs our attention towards the fact that the peripheralisation of the Virgin Mary can be a cause of tension and therefore polarization within the Roma communities.

Roma communities in Slovakia construct their identifications in the manner of other peripheral groups – in a centric manner. As the author explains, those communities that the majority considers marginal or peripheral often build a parallel, closed world, and place themselves at the centre of it. The experience of marginality is thus mitigated by the experience of their own community, accompanied by feelings



of unity and exclusivity that are reserved for members of the group alone. With their unwritten system of values and rules, the Roma position themselves at a centre where traditional Christian transcendences – God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary are key structural elements. Their deep devotion to the Virgin Mary allows them to create a secure niche in the framework of their communities where their ethnic, cultural and religious system of values becomes central.

Finally the author opens many questions, calling for discussion and continued research of the issues under investigation. Of particular importance are questions connected to the ethnicised Chocolate Mary – will she one day help Slovakian Roma to find their road “from the periphery to the centre” or will she herself be marginalized, and watch over the Roma from the religious periphery? It is ironic, as the author concludes, that the creation of the Chocolate Mary as a voice of internal Romani emancipation in Slovakia has been threatened by the religious pluralism following 1989 and the arrival of the Neo-Protestant Evangelical movements.

In her new book Tatiana Zachar Podolinská presents a profound and comprehensive analysis of the religiosity of the Roma in Slovakia, with a particular focus on Marian devotion. The work takes a systematic approach to the phenomenon of Marian devotion, utilizing a combination of various theoretical perspectives in order to explain the specific and hidden aspects of the issue, and the processes that are underway. The book presents a very wide picture of Slovak society, particularly in the period after 1989 and the post-communist transformation. It presents copious field material and both the style of writing and the numerous photographs that illustrate and document the presentation allow the reader to experience the process of fieldwork themselves, conduct in-depth interviews with the Roma and ‘visit’ their homes, decorated with pictures and statues of the Virgin Mary. The book represents a unique contribution to both Romani and Religious Studies.

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**JANA LINDBLOOM:**

**Transformácia a zánik poľnohospodárskych družstiev**

**[The Transformation and Cessation of Agricultural Cooperatives]**

*VEDA, Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava 2019, 255 p.*

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Slovak countryside underwent radical changes in the way of life, being forced not only to cope with the relicts of feudalism and collectivisation in the search for solutions for the living strategies of its inhabitants within a historically short period, but also to handle modernisation issues that marked the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this time in their globalised form in the context of the European Union.

The changes in people’s life strategies tied to agricultural production can be understood only on the basis of knowledge about such production of the previous decades – the period before and after the transformation of Slovak agriculture – since today, it is not only modernisation, but also various institutional pressures that make people intrinsically linked to agricultural primary production seek new ways of adaptation to the emerging social reality. They