ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND ADVOCACY RESEARCH: THEORY IN ACTION AMONG ROMANI NGOS IN UKRAINE

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Debates on the nature of the relationship between advocacy and scholarship have been long-standing in ethnographically based disciplines such as anthropology. Scholars have questioned how social and cultural engagement with interlocutors in the field informs academic inquiry and how scholarly research benefits advocacy projects (Kirsch 2002). This essay acknowledges that the boundaries between scholarship and advocacy blur according to how scholars conduct fieldwork and apply research results to benefit the people with whom they work. Moreover, it delineates increasingly common fieldwork situations in which activist agendas play a substantial role. I identify how processes of research production and knowledge construction are shared between the researcher and the research population. Local institutions and actors play a powerful role in determining the parameters, orientation, and outcomes of the research process. How do researchers' engagements with social movements influence ethnographic inquiry? And to what degree do resulting research outcomes reflect the agency of the researcher in relation to the agenda of activists among whom the researcher conducts fieldwork?

I base my arguments on ethnomusicological fieldwork conducted among Romani communities in Transcarpathia in 2002-2004. Transcarpathia, Ukraine's western-most region, is home to the country's largest compact Romani settlements and a significant number of Romani NGOs founded since Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. At the time of my fieldwork, many such NGOs were participating in projects funded by the Open Society Institute in Budapest, the International Renaissance Foundation in Kyiv, and the International Organization for Migration in Geneva. My own involvement in such NGO projects stemmed from my willingness to assist my Romani interlocutors and to work on topics important to them, with the hope that this would allow me to better integrate with local Romani communities. The resulting ethnographic analysis brings understanding to the ways relations of knowledge and power are produced, perpetuated, and challenged by minority groups in postsocialist society and by those who conduct research in their midst.

The Research-as-Advocacy Challenge

Recent examples within ethnomusicology reveal that representations and processes of discursive production are being influenced by advocacy agendas that originate either from among interlocutors or from ethnographers themselves. For instance, Angela Impey, in her ethnomusicological work in the Dukuduku Forests of South Africa, documents songs that reflect local knowledge about the environment. These songs are part of a disappearing tradition due to geographic displacements of communities and rapid socio-economic transformation in the region. Impey links ethnomusicology to community development and environmental action by applying participatory research methodologies to develop an oral history and advocacy project that aims to help the community gather financial resources and to share cultural and environmental information via the Internet between the people of Dukuduku and other indigenous forest peoples throughout the world (Impey 2002). Dale Olsen, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Florida, has initiated a similar web-based project titled "Ethnomusicology as Advocacy," which "includes musical introductions to cultures in peril, transition, or near extinction" (Olsen 2007). Featuring pictures, text, and audio collected among Warao in Venezuela, with sections on Ainu in Japan, Aymara in the Central Andes, and Cajuns in Louisiana forthcoming, Olsen clarifies the project's goal as "not about the survival of music, per se (although that would be desirable), but about the survival of cultural groups" (*ibid.*). The proliferation of such projects and the inclusion of new theoretical rubrics such as "Social and Political Action" in recent ethnomusicology readers (cf. Post 2006) raises questions regarding how scholars approach the transnational processes that influence not only our thinking about such applications of ethnographic theory but also the thinking of our interlocutors. Both the ethnographer and the interlocutor are co-authors and co-participants of a globally mediated advocacy discourse regarding cultural rights. However, one may argue that the ethnographer's interest is rooted more in recognizing and deconstructing this discourse while our interlocutors' aims are in using the discourse to benefit from it as much as possible.

A growing engagement with advocacy within ethnographically oriented disciplines stems from current post-colonial thinking as well as conscious critiques of ethnographic methods of representation. Researchers face the complexity of representing people who are capable and want to represent themselves. This is evident in contexts where interlocutors work through a collective means to gain group recognition on a local, national, or transnational scale and believe that the ethnographer's either direct or indirect involvement will help them attain their goals. Representatives from social movements express their stake in the outcome of research that deals with images they create and information they publish. They aim to control the public dissemination of sensitive material to which, in many cases, the researcher is also privy. Interlocutors anticipate that the researcher's findings will be positive and that the researcher will utilize his or her ethnographic writing as positive PR for the interlocutors' cause. They expect the researcher to work toward the goals set by the interlocutors themselves and not diverge into other agendas.

Within such an overlapping scene, unforeseen roles easily emerge or are ascribed to the ethnographer during fieldwork. My intention had not been to involve myself in Romani cultural and political advocacy. I had come to Transcarpathia to study the role of music in the socialization of young Romani women. Few Romani men however, particularly those involved within the bourgeoning Romani rights movement, were interested in my topic, meaning in what I as a music scholar could offer of benefit to them. They complicated my attempts to speak privately to Romani women and viewed me as an asset that would be more helpful to their respective communities in other ways. To them, I was an American who spoke English and could help disseminate information in the West regarding police abuse, economic deprivation, and increasing marginalization of the Romani minority in post-socialist Ukraine. My research positioning and my own attempts to justify my research project on musical practices became more complex when I experienced physical and social anti-Roma discrimination firsthand. I reassessed my original dissertation project when I bore witness to two violent police raids on the Romani settlement in which I lived.

During my fieldwork, I believed I worked on equal ground with local male Romani NGO leaders. Looking back, I recognize, however, that my interlocutors determined my standing on a case-by-case basis. At times, my affiliations with Romani NGOs were highlighted. For instance, I was often asked to speak at meetings and public conferences where representatives from philanthropic organizations were present. My presence as a scholar in such contexts legitimated the funding applications for various NGOs that were viewed as more trustworthy with a scholar on their side. In other contexts, Romani community leaders publicly downplayed my role within the Romani movement in Ukraine. They believed that as a woman I could undermine their authority. I was invited to participate in public forums only when my identity as a Western scholar reinforced the authority and political agency of Romani NGO leaders.

The shifts in my identity between Romani NGO-affiliate, Western researcher, ethnic Ukrainian, non-Roma, friend, musician, and white American female were determined by my Romani interlocutors much more so than by my actions or by my personal perceptions of self in the field. The ethnographer is no longer an observing participant but, rather, a participatory researcher who plays an increasingly integrated role within community-based processes of representation. Our interlocutors push us to define our positions on topics of interest to them and judge us accordingly. As Carol Silverman, scholar of Romani music, surmises, our willingness to intermix our positions as friends, advocates, and fieldworkers yields the types of information to which we have access (Silverman 2000). In turn, our choices in terms of what we say and do influence local and global understandings of the people and the social phenomena we study.

Direct and indirect involvement in advocacy provides the ethnographer with experiential understandings of power relations and agency during fieldwork that result in the production of knowledge. An ethnographer may become involved in advocacy through mostly one of two approaches. In each case, fieldwork plays a pivotal role. First, prior awareness of local socio-political issues informs the type of research an ethnographer chooses to undertake. This research approach divulges a particular ideology as regards the positioning of the researcher in relation to his/her research subject. In contrast, many ethnographers enter the field without prior awareness of how their research plays into and effects local socio-political issues on a broader level. They negotiate their role as researcher to help enhance particular causes their interlocutors deem important.

Often in practice, however, such positions become much more complex due to multiple affiliations, priorities, relationships, and roles that arise between the researcher and people with whom s/he works. An example of such complexities is best illustrated through a story from my personal fieldwork experience with a Romani community in Uzhhorod in 2002. I was aware of the tense political situation in Ukraine between government and oppositional forces and witnessed firsthand the government's mistreatment of voters and widespread election fraud during the 2002 Parliamentary elections. Therefore, I did not hesitate to respond to the call for international election observers for the 2004 Presidential Elections whose fraudulent outcome gave rise to the massive anti-government protests that have come to be known as the Orange Revolution. The function of international observers was to monitor the workings of the electoral committees that distributed and counted the paper ballots in polling stations. I monitored election procedures in Uzhhorod because I had conducted fieldwork there among Roma two years prior. My identities as researcher, election monitor, and Romani rights advocate collided almost immediately upon my second arrival in Ukraine. In Kyiv, I learned from Romani rights leaders that a Romani settlement leader had allegedly manipulated Romani votes in Uzhhorod. This person had been one of my key research informants during my fieldwork in 2002. I had kept in close contact with his family since I had left the field and had based a chapter of my dissertation on ethnographic material gathered during my stay with his family. I was also the godmother of his grandchild. I felt it unjust to turn the Romani settlement leader over to authorities for election fraud without first verifying the validity of such accusations on my own. My personal conflict over what actions I should take in response to the allegations serves as a telling example of ethnographers' blurred personal and research allegiances in the field.

During the Orange Revolution, I did not have (or make) time to verify the accusations made against the Roma settlement leader and did not act on this information as an election observer because of my personal commitments to him. This frustrated representatives from a Romani NGO with which I had continued my affiliation from the time of my fieldwork. They, in turn, published a newspaper article without my knowledge or consent, stating that I, as an international election observer, had personally uncovered election violations perpetrated by the Romani leader in question. In response to my inaction, the Romani NGO acted in my name, justifying their actions with a statement that as a friend of Roma, my main duty was that of advocate. Furthermore, my responsibility was to support the interests of the Romani organization with which I was affiliated. The interests of the institution and the social movement overshadowed those of my personal relationships and academic interests in the field. The situation needed to be resolved through judicial intervention and prevented me from returning to my dissertation field site for one year. This pivotal wake-up call regarding a "worst-case scenario" in terms of fieldwork gone wrong has made me think critically about how and for what reasons scholars become involved in advocacy-related research.

Romani NGOs and Cultural Advocacy

To broaden my critique, I peel back some of the layers of the Romani NGO structure in Ukraine at the time of my fieldwork. The Romani community in Uzhhorod, the administrative capital of Transcarapthia, has played an important role within the larger framework of the Romani cultural and political movement in Ukraine. The city, a few kilometers from the Hungarian and Slovak borders, is home to influential Romani NGOs that aim to represent local Romani interests on a national and international level. The NGOs I worked with in Uzhhorod were run by musician families who began their work in the mid-1990s with the help of cultural grants from philanthropic organizations such as the Open Society Institute and the International Renaissance Foundation. Many such funds were used to put on music festivals and theater productions in the city. These events aimed to promote Romani cultural expression in the public sphere. Festival organizers used these forums to feature thematic material that brought to attention the dire poverty that increased dramatically in Romani settlements in the economic crisis of the 1990s. The economic collapse contributed to a rise in anti-Roma sentiments among the population as well, and, as a friend of Roma, I experienced many similar types of discrimination in my personal and professional exchanges with non-Roma in Transcarpathia.

Thus, at the time of my fieldwork, I believed in the value of such cultural projects and assisted with them. First of all, I worked as a translator for the Uzhhorod-based *Romani Yag* [Romani Fire] Internet newspaper (www.romaniyag.uz.ua), the largest Romani newspaper in Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Belarus that addresses Romani rights issues. The information Romani NGO directors asked me to disseminate through this publication became an important and valuable part of the research material I collected. They also asked for my advice regarding the types of representational tools to use to make their culture-based political agenda more effective through its dissemination in local and transnational media.

Despite such efforts, however, Romani settlements in Ukraine continue to reflect high (and, in some cases, increasing) levels of unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, and disease. The network of more than 80 Romani NGOs in Ukraine has taken on responsibilities for implementing foreign aid with the goal of diminishing the negative impacts of overwhelming social issues. Yet, my continued research has led me to recognize that Romani NGOs do not always help people who are in greatest need. There is an autocratic structure within Romani NGOs that is, in many ways, a roadblock to economic development within impoverished Romani communities. It is important to remember that directors of Romani NGOs are not officials elected by Romani communities. Rather, they are predominantly men who support themselves with the aid of grants provided by granting agencies. In many Romani settlements in Transcarpathia, for instance, access to Western financial aid has allowed some Romani NGOs to usurp the traditional authority of community elders. To a degree, the present system of intervention has kept poorer Roma impoverished and has denied them agency in terms of political and socio-economic community-based development (Trehan 2001). Simultaneously it has allowed for a small percent of educated, affluent Roma to reap the benefits of philanthropic aid. This phenomenon mirrors a general trend in postsocialist Ukraine, where a small number of politically and economically powerful people have been able to manipulate numerous state and social mechanisms to benefit personal interests.

It is precisely this broader context that was not initially apparent to me when I began my work on various NGO projects. I found myself caught in a discourse of images and statistics that were manipulated to socially, economically, politically, and personally benefit the directors of Romani NGOs rather than impoverished Roma. Throughout the 1990s, donor aid made persons living in Romani settlements in Transcarpathia dependent on the network of Romani NGOs within the political and socio-economic sphere. Because Romani NGOs became the most visible community-based structures, they functioned as mediators between the state and the people. This is changing slowly as the general economy in Ukraine begins to improve. Five years after my initial fieldwork, I have noticed that while my former interlocutors are still poor in relation to the surrounding population, the settlement is not dominated to such an extent by the politics of NGOs as it was before. In 2002, the *romskií lider,*[1] a director of a Romani NGO, offered social and judicial protection for Roma who lived in the area. A curious socio-economic phenomenon had emerged. While at the time of the Soviet Union Roma worked independently of their community and had much more freedom to follow individual paths separate from the community, the economic crisis in Ukraine during the 1990s made them highly dependent on the Romani NGO, particularly in their experiences with corrupt police and government officials. In exchange for such "protection," Romani citizens were expected to show support in various ways for their NGO representatives. As evidenced in many of Transcarpathia's Romani settlements during the 2004 Presidential election, Romani NGO leaders exerted great influence over how community members cast their votes.

To better understand how Romani NGO leaders garnered local power in Ukraine, it is fruitful to analyze historical caste divisions in Romani society that were exaggerated through the donor network. As Ladányi and Szelényi explain, castes are social cleavages within ethnically marked groups whose exclusion from mainstream society is extreme (Ladányi and Szelényi 2006, 11). Though it is difficult to speak of strict distinctions among Romani communities in Ukraine, interviews reveal subjective stratifications between varying Romani cultural and linguistic groups in relation to each other. Let us consider, for instance, the positioning of musicians within such a discourse. From the late 19th century until the fall of the Soviet Union, male Romani musicians in Transcarpathia claim that the highest caste among them was that of musician families who performed for non-Romani restaurant patrons. These same interlocutors state that the middle caste comprised of Roma who made their living selling and trading goods. The lowest caste were the Romani untouchables, the poorest rung of society. Affluent Romani horse-traders in Lviv, however, claim that the musician caste was considered representative of the "Romani elite" on a very local level in Transcarpathia. They position themselves in this highest category by arguing that only person who can afford to hire musicians is a representative of the "Romani elite." Suffice it to say, social and economic status play an important role in the reformulation of Romani society that happens in light of international philanthropic assistance.

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[1] "Lider" has been borrowed from the English word "leader," an example of discourse introduced through the international donor network.

Ethnically based grants assume a level of homogeneity among minority groups in need of financial assistance. The structure of the development network bases itself on the premise that individuals, namely Romani NGO directors, are able and willing to represent the needs and views of the ethnic communities in which they work. Such attitudes result in simplistic approaches on the part of donors and local governments in addressing people's needs. Further difficulties arise because Romani NGOs compete against each other for a limited amount of financial resources within ethnically defined funding categories. As a result, factions have arisen in Romani communities depending on which NGO a person supports and benefits from. That is to say, money has contributed to a rising tension both within Romani communities and with the general non-Romani citizenry on a local and national level. This occurs most often when directors of other national minority organizations compete against Roma for funding from region-specific donor organizations.

In the mid-1990s, when philanthropic organizations such as the Open Society Institute began to offer cultural development grants, Romani musicians in Transcarpathia benefited from this because they had the artistic skills the grants required. They were also better skilled to engage with donors than their counterparts in other parts of Ukraine because they spoke Hungarian (the Open Society Institute is in Budapest). For instance, one Romani violinist/NGO director claims that he secured a grant from George Soros, a Hungarian-American philanthropist, by recording a CD that featured pre-WWII popular Hungarian melodies known to Soros. Allegedly gifting this CD to Soros in person at a conference in Kyiv, the director claims that Soros wept upon hearing the music and approved funding for a Romani music-recording studio in Uzhhorod. This preference on the part of donors to support NGOs in Transcarpathia has led to many rifts within the Romani rights movement in Ukraine itself because Romani leaders in central and eastern parts of Ukraine consider Romani groups in Transcarpathia to be culturally assimilated. Because they allegedly speak a less "pure" form of Romanes, NGO directors in eastern parts of Ukraine refer to Roma in Transcarpathia as "Tsyhany" (Gypsies), not Roma.

The majority of Romani NGO directors in Transcarpathia essentially use images of the lower caste poor as a basis for statistics upon which they apply for grant aid. This is evident in a video montage that an Uzhhorod-based Romani NGO wanted to present to potential international donors. The video clip was filmed in Transcarpathia by professional filmmakers close to the time when I began my fieldwork. It features scenes of nature, rippling water, and a bonfire that symbolically reflects upon the nomadic culture of Romani groups. This culture was outlawed in the Soviet Union by a decree issued by Nikita Khrushchev in 1957. According to it, many Roma were forced into cheap housing built without plumbing and/or electricity at the edges of towns and were made to settle in the urban area closest to where they were at the time the decree was issued. The montage in the video represents images filmed in various Romani settlements in the Transcarpathian region and is accompanied by a soundtrack sung in Russian and Romanes.

According to Sasha Latsko, who identifies himself as *baron* (elder, also, *birov*) of the poorest Romani settlement in Uzhhorod, representatives from local Romani NGOs come into the settlement only when escorting international donors and human rights activists. In an interview, Latsko referred to poor Roma as "caged animals," drawing parallels between donors and visitors in a zoo.[2] Elaborating on this metaphor, he referred to the representative from the local Romani NGO who accompanied the donors as the "gatekeeper." The video presents

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[2] Interview with Sasha Latsko, Uzhhorod, August 21, 2002.

data that appeals to Western grant agencies. This includes a demonstrated local need for financial aid and a demonstrated ability on the part of the NGO to manage this aid. Unfortunately, it distributes many of the financial resources allotted for impoverished persons in Romani settlements to persons of Roma ethnicity who are not in relative need of aid. This structure of aid distribution further marginalizes the poorest segment of the Roma population featured in this video and other grant applications. Romani NGOs, functioning within an internal set of socio-cultural hierarchies and politics, recognize that as long as there are "poor Roma," they will continue to receive donor aid.

This essay identifies a current shift within ethnographically based disciplines such as ethnomusicology that concern themselves with advocacy, understood by some scholars as applying ethnographic methods to help ensure the "cultural survival" of certain groups (Olsen 2007) and by others as a way to help seek solutions for contemporary social problems. Ethnomusicologists Svanibor Pettan and Ursula Hemetek have played critical roles in Kosovo and Austria respectively in bringing awareness to Romani issues through processes of documentation, cultural mediation, and presentation of Romani musical traditions in the non-Roma public sphere (Hemetek 2006, Pettan 2002). On the one hand, advocacy researchers can, as Jennifer Post argues, offer their knowledge of local practice, along with their wider access to resources that can help facilitate community-based action (Post 2006, 10-11). My advocacy and research experience has helped me understand that despite the alleged grass-roots appearances of such actions, however, the questionable success of such community actions is determined on many levels by Western economic and political forces. As evidenced in the afore-explicated analysis of philanthropic development aid allotted for Roma in Ukraine, Western institutions play a highly significant role in establishing and perpetuating global frameworks through which mediated cultural expressions are understood. Shifts within the Western networks play a critical role in transforming and determining what we understand by the notion of culture and what we do in its name. Because the thinking about advocacy research is still developing, scholars must be conscious of colonizing processes that can function under the guise of cultural representation. While our interlocutors may use the cultural representations we choose to analyze for political means, it is important to practice caution regarding our own involvement, as it is not always clear whom our best intentions benefit in the long run.

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