

Between Sinful and Righteous:
Conversion to Pentecostalism in a Roma Community in
Georgia

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Abstract

Pentecostal conversion which promotes an ideology of “born-again” is often conceptualized as a tool of self-empowerment. The Gospel of Prosperity preaches that people can attain wealth and success through the power of prayer. However, to achieve this, one has to break all links with their past. In a Roma community of Kobuleti, in Western Georgia Pentecostalism does something opposite. Instead of converting illiterate and powerless people into rational agents, it reproduces the structure of status differences and inequality. In this thesis I show that some Roma can hardly make a break; they go to the church, but at the same time cling to old cultural practices which are deemed to be demonical by Pentecostals. Because of these unsuccessful attempts of rupture, they are incomplete converts, standing on the margins of sinfulness and righteousness.

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Introduction

Around 1,000 Roma in Georgia represent one of the smallest, poorest and least studied minorities in the country (Sordia 2009). Georgians mostly associate them with street-beggars and they know little about the Roma's social conditions or cultural practices. Some¹ of them are even surprised to learn that the majority of the Roma are Orthodox Christians, the religion followed by more than 80 percent of Georgians.²

However, according to a 2009 report by the European Center for Minority Issues, over the past twenty years some Roma in one of the biggest permanent settlements in Kobuleti, seaside town in Adjara, Western Georgia, have converted to Pentecostalism (*Ormotsdaatianelebi*). By origin they belong to the Crimean Roma who are generally Orthodox Christians (Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004: 514). However, the Roma in this particular region had been Muslims before conversion. Adjara is an interesting setting for anthropological research since it represents the juncture of several religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam and one of the first Neo-Protestant churches also originated here. After the fall of communism space of contestation for religious entities opened; Islam began to wane and now, in the Roma community of Kobuleti Pentecostalism challenges the mainstream Orthodox Church.

Conversion to Neo-Protestantism in the Roma community needs to be seen in the global context. Pentecostalism is one of the most rapidly expanding religions in the world (Coleman 2000). Scholars argue that its doctrine appeals to converts globally through its "Gospel of Prosperity" preaching that health, success and wealth is attainable through the

¹ As a journalist I conducted street-polls for the Georgian magazine.

² According to the 2010 Barometer (Caucasus Research Recourse Center 2011) 84% of Georgians trust religious institutions and 90% of the population considers religion to be important in their daily life.

power of prayer (Martin 2002; Coleman 2000). The growing volume of literature on Pentecostalism stresses that neo-liberal agents, autonomous economic individuals can intentionally choose religion and reap benefits by rationally using spiritual resources. Money is not only a sign of prosperity but of a decent way of living, the marker of moral stability, disciplined work and righteousness. In this light, Pentecostalism can serve as a tool of self-empowerment (Smilde 2007).

Within the existing theoretical framework of Pentecostalism, In this thesis I explore personal and structural aspects of conversion; more precisely, I am interested, whether the Roma in Kobuleti can intentionally become Pentecostals, approach pragmatically their life concerns and facilitate social change by finding wage labor, increasing income and breaking away from their past. This question is related to broader sociological theory conceptualizing conversion as a pivotal event which cleaves a person's life in two dichotomous parts, before and after (Robbins 2004, 2007). In this light, baptized "new-born" believers can start their life from scratch and cast off structural bonds. I will explore whether the new position of a convert turns the Roma into free agents able to break away from their past or conversion itself reproduces the structure of status differences and inequality.

After the demise of the Soviet Union religious landscape became populated by various religious entities and especially, neo-protestant missionaries. Catherine Wanner (2007) argues that during the atheist rule, despite the persecution of religious institutions the belief in supernatural did not vanish; religious sensibilities and symbols lingered on in the public domain: the *sacred* still remained there since icons of saints were replaced by 'icons' of Soviet heroes and politicians. Hence, after the removal of formal restrictions, religious sensibilities reemerged from the secularized public sphere (Wanner 2007).

In Georgia, as in other post-socialist countries in the 1990s, the space for Protestant movements opened up but this process did not evolve as smoothly as elsewhere. With the surge of ultra-nationalistic movements religious minority groups became subjected to persecution by the state authorities as well as the Orthodox Church which gained enormous trust in the public domain (Nodia 1995; Martin 2002). The Institute of Liberty in Georgia in 2002 reported on numerous cases when the state and Orthodox Church authorities cracked down on Evangelicals and Baptists. For example, in 1999 at the Parliamentary session the Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II addressed state officials and called on them to adopt a law which would circumscribe “flourishing religious sects who were undermining the idea of Georgian nation”. As a result, the Orthodox Christian doctrine successfully replaced the soviet ideology and Stalinist discourse: If in the communist period Soviet system “secured” its members from the Western liberal values, after its demise Georgian Orthodox Church absorbed this function. It created a new ideological hybrid, in which religious and national identities merged (Maisuradze 2009). In the light of this, in Adjara where I conducted my fieldwork, Muslims also appeared under symbolic coercion of the Georgian Orthodox Church and its organizational body, the Patriarchate. Consequently, a lot of people converted to Christianity, and nowadays Islam remains confined mainly to highland areas of Adjara (Baramidze and Shioshvili 2010).

After the Rose Revolution in 2003 the climate for religious minority organizations improved as a new government promoted tolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities (Mindiasvili 2012). The Pentecostal Church in Georgia³ (*Sakharebis Rtsmenis Eklesia*) also

³ Pentecostal Churches in Georgia were founded from the end of 1910s and early 1920s by missionaries from Russia and Ukraine (Gegeshidze 1966; Tinikashvili 2006). However, the beginning of Evangelical missionary can be traced back to 19th century when Georgia was part of the Russian Empire. Evangelical missionaries spread through Caucasus from Scandinavia through the organization Swedish Slavic Mission, later called Light for the People (*Ljus i Öster*). One of its founding Fathers Nils Fredrik Höijer arrived in Georgia in 1885 to evangelize people. He opened there the “Swedish Shop” to cover up his missionary intentions. In 1915-1916 The leader of the

strengthened its bases after 2003. They count their congregation up to 10, 000 members according to 2008 data. However, the present number of the congregation must be higher, since for the last five years a lot of people have baptized. According to the bishop Oleg Khubashvili, the church has links with Swedish mission *Light for the People* and *Pentecostal Assemblies of the God* but it is the Georgian Pentecostal church and does not belong to any overarching umbrella organization.

Due to the scarce attention to religious minorities in Georgia, there is no anthropological work looking at how conversion may affect individuals and communities. However, the case of Georgia is interesting for a longstanding anthropological debate about controversies accompanying religious ‘revitalization’ in post-socialist countries. In this context, it is worth examining how dreams about modernity, neo-liberal politics and reestablishing ties with suppressed religious traditions are connected to each other.

In this thesis I enter into discussion about conversion conceptualized as continuity versus rupture. Pentecostalism promotes the notion of *break* which is accomplished through baptism. It means that a new-born believer has to take a vow of abstaining from practices defined by the church as *sins*. There are individual sins like alcoholism, and collective sins, local traditions which are also demonized (For instance, visiting the dead at the cemetery and symbolically “feeding” them). Within Pentecostalism categories of religion and culture are decoupled and because of that, people have difficulty to accommodate its doctrine.

In the theoretical framework I employ the concept of *imaginative rationality* by David Smilde (2007) and argue against it. He claims that people can intentionally adopt culture by

Persian mission in the US, David Urshan also established Pentecostal churches in Tiflis [Tbilisi] Amrear and Leningrad (Burgess, Maas 2002). During the 1920s Caucasus, including Georgia became populated by Evangelical missionaries. In Soviet Union the members of Pentecostal churches were detained and imprisoned several times for anti-Soviet and anti-atheist propaganda (Tinikashvili 2006).

imagining future benefits and through the Gospel of Prosperity live in better conditions. In the empirical analysis I test this hypothesis and use the concept to illuminate the relationship between structure and individual agency in conversion. Further on, an important aspect of my argument is that the Roma (mostly non-converts) define the church-membership and regular commitment as an *occupation* for which they are paid. I employ Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) concept of *symbolic goods* and *misrecognition* in relation to commercial interests of the church leaders. Thus I place the religious field within symbolic economy and explore how the demystification of the church as an institution affects the interaction between the Pentecostal preachers and the laity, how disclosing of "disavowal of economy" influences decisions of the Roma to convert or not to convert? I also ask whether the non-convert Roma can envisage the church membership as *their* occupation: Here I look at the hierarchical structure of the community and the capacity of social capital wielded by its members.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first, I discuss anthropological literature related to conceptualization of religious conversion as rupture and continuity; I also discuss Bourdieu's (1998) symbolic economy and its relevance to my case. The second chapter represents the methodological strategies employed during my fieldwork; I also give additional background information about the Roma in Kobuleti. In the third chapter, I present the empirical part of my thesis: findings and analyses within the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapters.

This thesis is the first attempt to analyze patterns of the Roma's conversion to Pentecostalism in Georgia and it opens room for further investigation of these issues. Theoretically it supports anthropological literature conceptualizing conversion as an interaction between continuity and rupture. It may also have practical contemplations for addressing the problems of the Roma in Georgia: poverty, unemployment and illiteracy.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

A growing body of anthropological literature tries to explain why Pentecostalism is so appealing for people. Apart from the Gospel of Prosperity (Coleman 2000) which I already mentioned, one of key characteristics of Pentecostalism is claimed to be its egalitarian nature (Robbins 2004; Wanner 2007). By egalitarianism it is meant that almost anyone can become an evangelist. People can preach and run churches without special education (Slavkova 2003). Pentecostal egalitarianism transcends class, ethnic, gender and race boundaries and makes people perceive themselves primarily as children of God. David Smilde (2007) who explores tenets of Pentecostalism in Venezuela, claims that Neo-Protestantism appears as a means for self-improvement which gives possibility to ‘many peasants and uneducated to teach college graduates’ (2007: 82). While discussing the success of Neo-Protestant movements, Foszto (2010) argues that Pentecostals stress the concept of *sincerity*, and offer a space where emotions could be openly expressed which might be also very appealing for marginalized groups, including the Roma (2010: 144-145).

The Pentecostal movements for the Roma originated in France and within thirty years their number in Western Europe reached up to 70 000 (Gog 2012: 392). Intensive conversion to Evangelical movements became widespread phenomenon after the fall of communism. Sorin Gog (2011, 2012) explores how this process evolved in Romania. If during communism the Roma were constrained to establish evangelical churches, after its fall their communities reorganized themselves and through Pentecostal churches started forging their unique identity to fight ethnic and social exclusion (Gog 2012: 389-399). In the same vein, Paloma Gay Y Blasco in Spain (2000) and Patrick Williams (1987) in France discuss the creation of distinctive Roma ethno-religious categories through conversion to evangelicalism.

However, the situation is a bit different in Transylvania where Foszto (2010) claims that the membership of Pentecostal church could not overcome status differences among the Roma.

1.2. Conversion: Rupture and Continuity

The crux of Pentecostal doctrine lies in the concept of *rupture* (Engelke 2004; Robbins 2004; Snow and Machaleck 1984; Wanner 2007). In their own narratives converts often divide their lives into two phases: *before* and *after* conversion (Snow and Machalek 1984). The vision of a self as “reborn” is strengthened by the notion of empowerment through the Holy Spirit (Peel 2009:19; Wanner 2007). As Joel Robbins (2004) shows, during Evangelical conversion, traditional culture from which people have to break away, becomes *demonized*. Converts are encouraged to keep traditional and post-conversion cultures separate. Pentecostalism is often successfully adjusted to local concerns: alcoholism, drug addiction, conjugal relationships or other problems (Blasco 2000; Martin 2002; Smilde 2007). Hence, conversion is often conceptualized as a strategy of self-empowerment (Vate 2009:42).

By the same token, David Smilde (2007) points to the massive conversion to Evangelicalism in Latin America and through the concept of *imaginative rationality* proposes that religious meanings can be implied from the social context and addressing these problems can be a religious end (2007:216-217). By *imaginative rationality* he means that “when people encounter problems, create new projects to address them, and then reflectively evaluate the success of their projects” (2007:52). As he puts it, in Venezuela Evangelicals use religious images to identify the causes of abuse, crime, family conflict and overcome them practically. For instance, if converts carry out what God orders, the Lord will help them to get rid of alcoholism or drug addiction. On the one hand, Smilde shows that belief is intentional

(2007: 145); on the other hand it is important that adherents see the project not as their own idea, but as something that comes from an external force. This reduces their own responsibility and strengthens the role of Evangelical practice. Hence there are three main elements which constitute his theoretical framework:

1. This-worldly ends addressed by Pentecostalism (sobriety, strong family, wealth) are part of the spiritual realm constructed through religious concepts.
2. Successful projects provide Evangelicals “with reasons to believe.”
3. Adherents employ narratives to describe their own conversion stories in terms of God’s agency. It enables them to attribute minimal role to their efforts and present themselves as chosen by God (2007:103-4).

I think the conceptualization of conversion as a unidirectional process is a very straightforward understanding and I will demonstrate it through my empirical material. People can not always adopt culture to attain social benefits, and the causes rooted into particular social structure have to be analyzed.

It also should be pointed out that the concept of *rupture* in opposition to *continuity* belongs to a particular Christian ideology. At the example of Protestant churches, Robbins (2007) argues that Christianity in its meaning signifies radical cleavage; historically this disruption occurred when Christianity broke away from Judaism and launched a new epoch. However, there is distinction in perceptions of time and self in different modes of Christianity. For instance, in Orthodoxy puts more emphasis on continuity (Ware 1993).

While some scholars stress the rupture, others reject the ‘before-after’ dichotomy and describe conversion as a process in which both continuity and discontinuity resonate in people’s lives. Paloma Gay Y Blaso (2000) who studied Evangelical *Gitano* in Spain, argues that for Gypsies of Madrid, Pentecostalism “embraces what they perceive as unavoidable

change while *remaining* Gitano” (2000:2). It is rather a synthesizing process of an old and a new; converts say they stay Gitano, but at the same time become *better* Gitano; they describe the process as a self-reformation. Pentecostalism gives a possibility to young people who previously have not been referred with the same respect as *elderly* to change masculine hierarchies and fight drug addiction. Simultaneously, conversion becomes also a means to preserve their Gitano identity in the process of globalization.

In the same vein, Pelkmans (2009) argues that anthropological obsession with conceptualizing conversion as a straightforward rupture prevents scholars from analyzing it in relation to a broader social context within which conversion unfolds (2009:144-145). As he puts it, continuity is often preserved even during Pentecostal conversion which theologically is expected to require a curt disjuncture with an old life-style. There are cases in post-socialist countries where Pentecostal missionaries left local culture intact, and people after conversion just added new features to old religious and cultural representations (Broz 2009:32). For instance, in Kyrgyzstan Evangelical missionaries both accept and challenge local culture and offer a new hybrid: “Kyrgyz in form and Christian in content” (Pelkmans 2007:887). In the framework of one festival in Pentecostal Kyrgyz community it is possible simultaneously to perform a circumcision, play traditional local musical instruments and preach the Bible. By the same token, Chukchi, indigenous people of Siberia, were accustomed to herding reindeer for centuries, but Pentecostals argued that their special attitude towards reindeer could be interpreted as idol-worshipping (Vate 2009:46). However, instead of abandoning these rituals converted Chukchi turned them into festivals or feasts (Vate 2009:46). Redefinition of local practices under the label of “culture” instead of “religion” enabled converts to keep old representations alive. This strategy of clothing religious meanings in cultural “outfit” is a part of the Soviet inheritance when religion was

often associated with culture and ethnicity, the process of so called “folklorization” (Pelkmans 2009:6).

As Pelkmans puts it, soviet secularization project failed to disrupt religious continuity. Apart from moving religion into private domain, the soviet rule changed its understanding, contributed to the process of the objectification of religion and conflated it with national-ethnic categories. As he points out, even atheist Kazakh and communist party member could call himself Muslim, hence, religion was seen as a marker of cultural identity as well (Pelkmans 2009:1-16). The same process took place in Georgia, including Adjara. Many Muslim rituals have been preserved in the form of mores and traditions (Baramidze and Shioshvili 2010:25).

While discussing conversion, it is important to consider not only the historical context, but also what kind of social and economic challenges it has to face. These problems often push people to convert temporarily. In reference to the narratives of *temporary conversion*, Pelkmans (2009) compares two communities, one where Pentecostalism succeeded and another where it failed. (By failure he means that people withdrew from the church). It turns out that the Pentecostal church made significant inroads in the community where it could yield ‘tangible results’ of social and economic change. However, in another place it could not succeed because of continuous tensions among converts and their neighbors or relatives (2009: 143-162). Pelkmans (2009) argues that teachings about better life are not enough for people to adopt a new culture and continue practicing it. Besides, it needs social and economic environment where Pentecostal churches could flourish. In my case, I will demonstrate that people’s frustration caused by the inability to envisage tangible benefits foments covert or sometimes explicitly expressed antagonism towards the Pentecostal church. Moreover, they have different values of money and hold different attitudes towards accumulation and expenditure of financial resources.

With reference to the drawbacks of “cultural innovation” David Smilde (2007) sketches out reasons why some people may not convert to Evangelicalism. He proposes the concept of *relational imagination* which dwells on the importance of networks and the physical proximity of believers. He argues that when members of a family of origin live together, non-believers have a strong conservative influence and it prevents individuals from changing their life trajectories. Such people rarely convert even when they encounter challenges. He argues that conversion comes easier with social rupture and this is what ideology of ‘born-again’ conversion supports.

This theoretical framework of rupture-continuity gives me the space to explore how the Roma of Kobuleti accommodate the Pentecostal discourse and how they position themselves within shifting set of cultural configurations. Among my informants, certain number of people can be regarded as *incomplete converts*, in Pelkmans’s words, “temporary converts” or what Foszto calls “reluctant converts” (2010: 128-132). Committed adherents justify conversion when the investment is paid off (one is cured of disease or one finds a job), but what happens if people can not envisage new perspectives or they mistrust preachers? Further on, in my case I will explain what kind of factors may play a central role in pushing people outside the religious circle and make them cling to continuity.

1.3. The Pentecostal Church Economy

Based on my empirical evidence, I will show that in Kobuleti after conversion to Pentecostalism the community has remained fragmented. This fragmentation and stratification of the community into converts, incomplete converts and non-converts is expressed in narratives of mistrust towards the leader of the church. To explain how these

narratives are produced I use Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *symbolic goods* and *misrecognition* (1998[1930-2002]:92-123).

Bourdieu in his work *Practical Reason: On Theory of Action* argues that "Church is an enterprise with economic dimension" (1998:124). At the example of Catholic Church he notes that clerics often euphemize their work and present their occupational duties as ends themselves through disavowal of its economic bases. And it is the way how religious institutions function by the logic of rendering things inexplicit (1998:113-122).

Religious work includes a considerable expenditure of energy aimed at converting activity with economic dimension into sacred tasks. One must accept wasting time, making an effort, even suffering, in order to believe that one is doing something other than what one is doing. There is a loss, but the law of conservation of energy remains true because that which is lost is recovered in another position (1998:119).

As Bourdieu puts it, the work of the clergy is perceived as a sacred duty. In this light, salary or wage for the service they provide to the parish are perceived as inappropriate definitions. Consequently, on the one hand by shrouding their tasks in ambiguity, the clergy live in *misrecognition* (1998:118) of their commercial interests; on the other hand they depend on gifts and donations of their clients which lead to the accumulation of economic capital. Bourdieu views this issue from a structural perspective and argues that the self-deception is reproduced through collective work, and it is not a product of an individual's mathematical calculation (1998:121). Thus he argues that the concept of *misrecognition* is related to the *economy of symbolic goods* which "rests on the repression or the censorship of economic interests" (1998:120). In this light, providing religious service: preaching, saving others' souls is a *symbolic good*.

It should be taken into account that Bourdieu (1998) discusses his theory about economy of symbolic goods at the example of Catholic Church which unlike Neo-Protestant churches is characterized with centralized government and hierarchical structure. It raises the question whether his theory can be applicable to neo-protestant churches. I will discuss this

aspect in details in the empirical chapter when I talk about different institutional structures and social relations.

Decentralized structure of governance and the speed by which Pentecostalism diffuses worldwide steering clear of bureaucratic hindrances, has become rendered as a success story of neo-liberal politics (Robbins 2011:52). No wonder that in post-socialist space Pentecostalism became very appealing for the people who have been frustrated with the implosion of the previous economic systems. Even within such a decentralized social system I show that in a small community of Kobuleti social and symbolic capital is accumulated mostly in the hands of church leaders. Bourdieu (1986) in *The Forms of Capital* writes:

The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. (1986: 241-58)

Hence, the social capital heavily depends on the capacity of social networks. Bourdieu (1986) also argues that appropriation of social capital can be a means to improve the social position of actors, consequently developing hierarchical structure of relationships within a particular group. I will show how this process unfolds in Kobuleti community.

Chapter 2

Methodology

I have conducted my research in Kobuleti, the town in Adjara, Western Georgia in April 2013. I spent almost a month in the town, particularly in the neighborhood where Roma families live. However, it was not my first visit to this place. I have worked on religious and ethnic minority issues in previous years as a journalist and visited Kobuleti Roma families as well as other Roma in different regions.

The Roma arrived in Georgia in the twentieth century, especially from around 1930 to 1970, mainly from Russia and Ukraine. According to different sources there are approximately 1000-1770 Roma in the country (Crowe 2007:193; Sordia 2009). Around 100 Roma reside in Kobuleti. They claim their ancestors arrived from Krasnodar during the World War II (Szakonyi 2008). Prior to starting sedentary way of life, they were camping across the river, today they live on the east side of railroad tracks on three main streets in detached houses. Among permanent problems illiteracy and unemployment are the main concerns.

Prior to the anthropological research of the Roma, I knew that they were religious; they frequently reflected on their religiosity in conversations about their culture and everyday life. During my visits in Kobuleti, I discovered that some local Roma are Pentecostals (*ormotsdaatianelevi*) and they lead stricter way of life compared to others. My interest to explore particularly this community arose from their distinctive religious affiliation. As I have already mentioned in the previous chapters, the majority of the population in Adjara before socialism was Muslim. Islam penetrated into Western Georgia from the 17th century. With the spread of the Ottoman rule many Georgians converted to Islam and by the 19th century the majority of Adjarians were already Muslims (Baramidze 2010: 9-26). Later ,

during the Soviet times almost all madrassas and mosques were destroyed. Meanwhile, Georgian historians and ethnographers tried to delete traces of Islam from the history of Adjara and claimed that Adjarians had never been ‘really’ Muslims (Pelkmans 2006:102-108). Nowadays this discourse among the Roma is bolstered by the Pentecostal Church. The pastor and other preachers often stress that their ancestors “did not know whom they were, they were just called Muslims.” From the legacy of the Islamist past, the Roma in Adjara preserved only surnames with Muslim roots (Sordia 2009) and cemeteries with religious symbolic: stars and crescent.

My research foremost is based on ethnographic study of the community and the role of pastor Aslanov’s church. Throughout the thesis, I use empirical evidence collected during my field trip in April 2013. During this period, I was living next to the church and pastor’s house. I was constantly attending cell meetings and home church gatherings (*sobranie*). I accompanied several times Roma women on street-selling to see how they communicate with each other and non-Roma, and how they reflect on their life problems. Such kind of participant observation was very helpful to gain their trust and get engaged in non-formal, friendly conversations. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the pastor and regular parish. For the first days, I was meeting them at the pastor’s home-church. But then I realized that some people were not regular church-goers. Then I started visiting each family in the evenings, knocking on their doors, introducing myself and asking for a small talk. Usually, it would end with an invitation for a cup of coffee and lengthy conversation. Usually I was accepted affably; there was only one case, when the host did not allow me to enter her house due to the illness of a family member. I was communicating with almost all my interlocutors in the Russian language. Hence, almost all interviews were conducted and recorded in Russian and later translated by the author of this thesis.

Another issue which needs to be pointed out relates to my own presence in religious community. From the very first meeting I clarified my position as a researcher, not a believer. Nevertheless, I was constantly seen as an object of conversion. After my first interview with the pastor he suggested to pray for my soul. He did not wait for my answer, put his palm on my head, started praying and speaking in tongues. He blessed me and asked God to help me achieve success in my academic work. Later when we went together to a bigger Pentecostal church in Batumi, the capital of Adjara, one of the congregants asked about my position, the pastor claimed that I already had accepted the Lord. Sometimes I felt awkward because the pastor's whole attention was directed towards me. He even took some pictures of me aligned with Roma girls, probably to show "the product of his work" to his colleagues in Sweden.

Laszlo Foszto (2010) argues that ethnographic research of individual conversion offers a window into wider social-cultural context surrounding the converts (2010:132). I think an ethnographic research conducted by me, which comprised observation (partially participant), as well as interviewing the Roma and living with them in the same space, was the most appropriate method to get familiar with social conditions in which they live and interact with each other. I conducted and recorded 15 semi-structured interviews. (Informal talks, evening walks and home conversations are not included in this list). I acknowledge the limitations of my findings due to the scarce time spent on the field; also a small size of the community gives little possibility to talk about general dynamics of Pentecostal movement in Georgia.

Chapter 3

The Pentecostal Church and the Roma Community in Kobuleti

3.1. Entering the Field

When I visited Kobuleti in summer of 2012, a small room in pastor Roma Aslanov's house was full of people; approximately twenty congregants were attending a gathering (*Sobranie*). The door was open and the sound of guitar was emanating through the whole street. Inside the room girls dressed in glittering blue and red dresses were standing behind the pastor's pulpit, singing and whirling around. The room looked modest: a brown wooden cross was hanging on the wall, pictures of the pastor featuring his visit in Sweden and other photos of services and healing rituals were pinned to the wall. At that time the pastor and the congregants knew beforehand that I was coming with a video camera to record their services, so they were ready to meet me. Luda, the pastor's 55 year-old female assistant was translating his speech into Georgian. It seemed the service was held for me, because nobody except me needed a Georgian translation. Old and young people were milling around the house. The first impression I got during my first trip to the town was that the whole neighborhood seemed to be deeply involved in religious practice.

In April 2013, when I visited the place again for my fieldwork I did not warn them beforehand; I arrived in the town, settled in the Roma neighborhood and knocked on pastor Aslanov's door. It was Friday, almost 7 pm and he was rushing to the cell group (*ocheika*) to preach. The *cell* is a home group which gathers every week at one of the houses of church members. We entered a tiny room in a ramshackle building with dirty walls and a broken floor. A TV set and two beds were the only pieces of furniture. A short lecture was dedicated to the upcoming Easter holiday celebrated by the Orthodox Christians as well as Protestants

on May 5th. The pastor noted that unfortunately, the Roma were not able to break away from the sinful past, and the devil (*dyavol*) was still hovering over them, so he prayed for the future revival of his people. Later when I asked whether people go to church regularly, he expressed his discontent that many of them come to church when they are in hardship or in urgent situation but soon forget about God; in his words, they are floating over the margins of “sinful and divine worlds.” The pastor is the most influential man in the community. At the same time he is a role model, the person who exemplifies a complete break with his past. For some Roma he is also a successful entrepreneur who gained material benefits through sobriety, praying and extended evangelical networks.

Following the stories of converts and non-converts in the next sections of this chapter first I will demonstrate how religious conversion (*uverovaniye*) through the narratives is conveyed as an individual transformation (Vallikivi 2009: 64), then I will bring to the fore another layer of analyses stemming from the accounts of my informants who delineate conversion as an interaction (Vate 2009) between rupture and continuity. Additionally, I outline economical and social structures in Kobuleti and how the Pentecostal church shapes the relationships among the Roma. Finally, I construe what kind of meaning non-converts inscribe in not joining the church and evaluate whether it is their pragmatic choice or they appropriate the language of salvation, unintentionally categorizing themselves into full and partial, compete and incomplete beings.

3.2. Conversion as a Break: The Pastor's Story

According to the Pentecostal conceptualization of moral renewal, one has to break away from the “dirty past” (Martin 2002:72) and become *born-again* (Wanner 2007). This is how one of my informants (Garik) narrates his story:

There was sewage. Filthy water was streaming down... Suddenly I appeared within this stream. And God told me: you are this foul! Then I felt that something clean plucked me out of the filth...And instantly I began detesting myself. It was a turning point in my life. At that moment I decided to live in God.

This is a classical conversion narrative describing one-time change, inspiration from a dream or vision, symbolic representation of the old associated with filth, the burial of Godless self, and an individual rebirth (Robbins 2004, 2011). Turning points are usually brought up by converts as the manifestation of God's power to change humans; hence, human endeavor to marshal one's life trajectory in a new direction is conceived as an individual victory through God's agency (Smilde 2007).

Pastor Aslanov's own story also represents a popular Pentecostal narrative of complete break. He converted 17 years ago; now he is 55. He has five children and 13 grandchildren. He was born and raised in Kobuleti in a family of musicians. His grandfather was a *baron*, the leader of the Roma community. After graduating Russian classes at school in Kobuleti he was playing and singing with his pianist father in a tourist club-sanatorium *Dom Otdikha* (The House for Retreat). During Soviet times, a lot of tourists were visiting Kobuleti from neighboring countries. Aslanov recalls that before conversion he had been consuming a lot of alcohol, sometimes taking drugs, smoking and frequently getting engaged in street brawls. When he was on the verge of collapse and apathy he got acquainted with an ice-cream-seller in the street who was proselytizing. The street-seller gave him the Bible and invited him to the Pentecostal church in Kobuleti. Since that time his life drastically changed. First he started reading the Bible. Then he attended gatherings several times and after

repentance got baptized with the Holy Spirit. Aslanov recalls a turning point in his life: “I was crying; I felt how the Holy Spirit touched me.” Soon he was baptized in the water too, and he started attending services regularly, reading and learning the Bible. Later he wanted to prove that “he was a fertile tree and was ready to show his fruits.” So he started evangelizing, travelling to villages to “spread the word of the Lord and save other people who were Godless.” According to him when one is reliable and have good skills for evangelizing, he or she can “flock the sheep”, become a pastor. In small Pentecostal groups it is a common practice when a preacher is not ordained officially but the laity calls him a pastor (Slavkova 2003).

Soon after conversion Aslanov formed a home group, the so called Roma Pentecostal church, though it is an informal place for weekly gatherings at the pastor’s house. As I already mentioned, Aslanov has a female assistant Luda, Moldavian Roma, who came to Kobuleti from a bigger city Kutaisi of Western Georgia. The house group of worship (*Gruppa Proslavleniya*) has two more permanent male members: 23 year-old Nushkin, the leader of youth group, and 27 year-old Gocha. Every Sunday the pastor holds a sermon at his place. He is also a member of a bigger Evangelical church based in Batumi, the capital of Adjara. Exactly this membership helped him to forge ties with Finnish Roma Pentecostal community in Sweden. They visited Kobuleti twice over the last three years. On Mondays children are given religious classes by the teacher of Bible who arrives from Batumi to Kobuleti. Classes are held in Russian, since most of Roma still speak better Russian than Georgian. Aslanov himself attended Russian School. He reads and preaches the Bible in Russian.

Aslanov is an example of dramatic change which other people in the neighborhood frequently refer to. His two-storey house is distinguished from other Roma huts. During my stay in the town he was going to buy a new automobile by money which his fellow

Pentecostals from Sweden donated to him. He also has musical equipment and a computer at his house. He is not working hard to earn a daily living. His wife had a stroke few years ago; hence, she can not trade now. Aslanov says he is selling shoes when he has a free time, but mostly he is praying, communicating with brothers and sisters (members of Batumi church) and watching CNL, the Russian language Evangelical TV channel. He always wears neat, clean and ironed clothes. His wife, Manana 52, is also converted. As Aslanov says she accepted the Lord after two years from his conversion. She was smoking a lot and after baptizing she quit. He says that God assists him in everyday life: when he goes to the market he knows he will sell his goods and God helps him achieve his goal. In the same vein, other Roma also talk about post-conversion changes: some learned reading due to God's assistance (Nushkin 23); some became cured from cancer or discovered their talent in evangelizing (Luda 55). However, the number of people whose life stories represent a complete rupture is little; I counted only five-six such cases.

Here I need to refer to Smilde's (2007) concept of *imaginative rationality* which I sketched out before, according to it, the Roma of Kobuleti should be able to make a pragmatic choice and pick up religious concepts to overcome problems such as addiction, violence, and family conflict. Addressing these problems can be the same religious goal like striving for eternal life (Smilde 2007:216- 217). Second point of his argument is that if a new believer sees the product of his or her attempts, their pragmatic conceptualization is validated. Pastor Aslanov's case of conversion seems to fit into this model. He says he started visiting church because he did not want to continue his sinful life: drugs, alcohol and street rows. Additionally, he clearly ascribes these achievements not to his force of will but to the Holy Spirit, which is a third aspect of Smilde's concept: Imagining the conversion in terms of God's agency (2007:104). However, pastor Aslanov's case of personal transformation is rather exceptional in Kobuleti, rather than typical. Clearly, this concept does not explain

much about inter-dynamics of conversion in Kobuleti. I will elaborate this point in the next section.

3.3. Incomplete Conversion: *Not Ready Yet*

Taking into consideration Pentecostal conceptualization of conversion I differentiate two main patterns of religious commitment: *conversion* aiming at a complete break from the past (Robbins 2004) (The pastor represents this narrative) and *incomplete conversion*, a long-term process of negotiation between *continuity* and *rupture* (Pelkmans 2007). Some of my informants belong to the third category: *non-converts* who stay aside the Pentecostal church or claim that they belong to the Orthodox Christian Church. With reference to incompleteness, restrictions associated with full commitment to the Pentecostal church sometimes are so costly for the Roma that they prefer to remain on the margins. In this section I will focus on *incomplete* and non-converts. I break down causes, designated by Pentecostals as *sins* which pull back the Roma and prevent them from full conversion, into two analytical categories: *Individual sins* (alcoholism, smoking and street life) and *cultural practices*. I would emphasize that it is a pure analytical divide; in fact, these two categories, individual and collective are inseparable in reality.

As pastor Aslanov points out, in order to convert, in the beginning one has to accept the Lord. This process consists of three stages: first, a believer should make repentance, secondly, he or she should abandon demons from his or her life, and thirdly, believers should be baptized with water which is a public manifestation of rebirth. It is evident from interviews that baptism with water is a crucial point in the process of conversion: Luda (50) reflects about this aspect: “During baptism with water people abandon their previous selves. I remember I plunged into river three times and that’s it. I was born again! Since that moment,

a person should not let in any dirt!” Luda’s remark indicates not only the importance of a symbolic burial and renewal of the self, but also the significance of post-conversion life-style. After baptism believers are subjected to restrictions: they have to abstain from drinking alcohol, smoking and abandon traditions which are considered “demonical” (Robbins 2004), since “one cannot serve two Gods” (Luda 50). The problem of alcoholism and other addictions is often addressed at weekly gatherings in Kobuleti church. Gocha (27) notes that “none alcoholic will get to heaven.” Smoking is also viewed by believers as a marker of sinfulness. Once I witnessed a street squabble between two girls, 14 and 15 years old. One of them, Aliyona at youth gathering had prayed for those peers “who come to church but still smoke.” The other girl (who was absent at that time at the service) called her friend “a stool pigeon”. Aliyona explained to me: “I do not want her to go to hell for smoking. She may end up in the hell only for the sake of one cigarette.”

These accounts demonstrate that Pentecostals consider only those cases as conversion in which people follow up baptism with active participation in religious rituals (Smilde 2007) and comply with requirements of purity (Aslanov). Thus, acceptance of the Lord does not make one *fully convert*. Regular involvement in church activities is necessary (Lindhardt 2011). Interviews reveal that water-baptism among the Roma is often viewed as a poignant step forward, since it signals the threshold after which adherents have to live in a full accordance with God’s commandments. One of the non-converts (Kolya 37) points out: “You have to be purer than a new born baby.” Precisely such a strict idea of self-discipline propagated by Pentecostalism elsewhere enabled Roma to fight addiction problems (Blasco 2000). However, in Kobuleti I found that most Roma families on the one hand claim they are afraid of God, but on the other hand they refrain from a complete break. Some Roma explain that if they take a vow to live with the Lord and meanwhile still continue committing sins, they will be strictly punished. One of the informants (Viola 32) mentions a *double-sin* which

means drinking, smoking, swearing or other *sinful* acts in the wake of conversion. It seems a radical shift deters some Roma from taking a burden on their shoulders. Mostly they go to the Pentecostal church but still prefer to stay at a preparatory stage: attend gatherings haphazardly being in the position of “not-ready-yet”. I call this long-term condition of fluctuation *incomplete conversion*.

It is important to note that *incomplete conversion* to Pentecostalism in Kobuleti does not mean that the Roma have to cut liaisons with pastor Aslanov’s church. They still can ask him for healing from illnesses or praying for their relatives. 37 year-old Lora points out: “I do not go to church regularly but God is in my life. When I was in coma for three days the pastor was praying for me. And I recuperated. I am grateful for it.” Lora converted when she was 24, but she still does not consider herself as a good believer like Aslanov. I want to emphasize that this “choice” of incompleteness is not the Roma’s pragmatic choice; it is a way of recognizing authority and their place in informal hierarchy where preachers are in power to classify people according to the “standards of purity”. 35 year-old Ruslan Meliamedov has five children and lives in a ramshackle hut. Having converted to Pentecostalism approximately 14 years ago he was one of the first converts in Kobuleti. He has not been baptized with water, because as he mentioned “his heart is not pure enough and he falls down frequently”. As I have shown, individual sins give a limited space for action to half-converts. Boundaries in this field are defined by the church. *Sins* which function as signs of continuity are labels showing who deserves the salvation and who does not; who goes to heaven and who is doomed.

Addiction and other individual sins are not the only impediments for spiritual perfection. The set of drawbacks for the rupture expands to local cultural practices in Kobuleti. In order to start a new life after conversion a “re-born” believer should destroy everything “satanic” in his or her milieu. For instance, the pastor burnt a Quran. His mother

had sewn a special cloth cover (*chikhol*) for the scripture; it was hanging on the highest spot in the living room. When family members learned about Aslanov's "barbaric" behavior they got furious and did not talk to him for a long time. As I observed, today Islam is not a competing religion for a local Pentecostal church; all informants whom I interviewed told me they do not know anything about Islam per se. They only remember that their grandparents were calling themselves Muslims. There are also a few graves on the Roma cemetery with Muslim symbols carved on the tombs: The star and crescent. Pentecostals have more problems with exiting local *traditions*: the ancestral veneration (Navrozashvili 2007) which is also a part of Orthodox Christianity. However, ancestors in Pentecostalism have no power over Christians, because the only spirit which can empower people is the Holy Spirit, thus the veneration of the dead becomes a demonic act that should be obliterated (Anderson 1993).

This is an important difference between Pentecostalism accentuating rupture and traditional cultures which stress continuity. Also, in Pentecostalism, friends and families are not saved; salvation is an individual project to be achieved (Robbins 2004: 299). Below I will show that a newly affirmed separation between culture and individually chosen religion triggers tensions among the older and new generation in Kobuleti. As brother Garik says, the Roma got acquainted with the "living word of the Lord" (*Jivoe Slovo*) through their church. Despite the fact that Pentecostals stress that they "do not carry a new culture," (Brother Garik) they try to peel off old cultural layers and introduce religion as a separate entity.

One of the local rituals which represent continuity with the past is visiting the dead at cemeteries. Easter is an important holiday which includes annual ritual of commemoration of deceased relatives. People take food and drinks, and have a feast among the graves of their deceased (BBC 2013). In spite of their Muslim roots, the Roma of Kobuleti are no exception. They go to cemeteries every year on Easter and commemorate their dead with lavish food and alcohol. This practice is characterized by Pentecostal Church as a sin. On the very first

day of my fieldwork I ended up at the cell group meeting where the pastor was reading a lecture about Easter and sinful practices which have to be eliminated. He pointed out that going to the cemetery, lighting candles for the dead and bringing food, especially on Easter holiday, or after a week from the Easter Holiday means “worshipping idols.” To confirm his argument he referred to the first commandment of the bible: “I am the lord the God. You shall have no other God before me” (Exod 20: 2-3). A harsh attitude towards cemetery rituals is prevalent especially in the young generation. I witnessed a dialogue between a 14-year-old boy, Jumber, and his grandfather Vova Alimov: Jumber was baptized in the Pentecostal church. He said his grandparents had not got rid of old traditions yet. I visited their place which is a two-room hut next door to Jumber’s apartment. In Vova’s (grandfather) room there was a big icon of Jesus hanging on the wall which also could be interpreted as an idol according to Pentecostal theology. Grandfather complained that pastor Aslanov is teaching his grandchild that “remembering of the dead is bad” but he said he did not agree with such implications. Jumber and his grandfather started an argument in front of me. Jumber ironically addressed him: “It is allowed to remember but not to worship or feed the dead at their graves. It means you are sacrificing food.”

This symbolic act of bringing food to the cemetery and “dining with the dead” (BBC 2013) could be interpreted as a form of communication with the ancestors. The word “will be delivered” (“*miuva*” in *Georgian*) in reference with the food, does not mean that the dead literally have a dinner. 23 year-old Jambuli underlines that it is living relatives who have the feast, not the dead: “We bring this food for us; the dead won’t eat it, right?” However, such interpretation still does not fit into a canonical form of Pentecostalism: Pastor Aslanov says it is the devil acting through people when they light up candles for the dead or even symbolically “feed” them: In the interview he notes: “The dead are dead! The soul goes either to hell, or heaven, depending how they had lived here...We can not have influence on

their future dwelling... We have to save living people, not the dead!” On the other hand, Orthodox priests often construe that church connects the living and the deceased so that they compose one imagined community: “The dead sympathize with the living and vice versa, the living should sympathize with the dead... The souls of sinners [in Afterlife] may acquire comfort through the prayer of the living... (Navrozashvili, 2007: 29-39). I gave these accounts not necessarily to put the Orthodox Christian and Pentecostal cultures in stark opposition into each other, at least it is not the gist of my argument. However, I suppose it is important to know in what kind of cultural context Pentecostals have to operate. Besides, the veneration of the dead and their perception as members of the transcendental imaginary is not restricted to Orthodox Christian culture (Astuti 1995) and even generally to religion (Bloch 2008).

It is evident that those who want to be considered fully converts in Kobuleti have to cast off some cultural practices. The problem is that an older generation does not associate veneration of the dead with idol-worshipping. Additionally, Pentecostals see cemetery rituals not only as idol-worshipping, but also present them in a rationalized vein, as an encouragement towards alcohol consumption. Individual sins which I described before are interrelated with cultural practices, and in totality they represent the world which should be abandoned in order to start a new life. Local tensions around cemetery rituals in Kobuleti mirror the clash between two different ideologies, the doctrines of rupture and continuity. Evangelical work aims to break the link between culture and religion (Pelkmans 2009), but the Roma do not draw clear-cut boundaries between the two. This issue can be explained also by the context of the region where they live.

During my field-work I was living with the Georgian host family, just 100 meters away from the house church. First thing what stroke me in the living room of my host, was an Orthodox icon of Saint George and the picture of Mecca hanging side-by-side. My host

Anjela, the woman about at the age of 35, said that the icon of St. George was a relative's present, and the calendar had been hanging on the wall before. She told me: "Why should I have taken off any of them? I feel respect for both religions. In fact, there is only one God." When I tried to find out more about religious attitudes of family members, I was told that grandmother and grandfather were Muslims. Grandmother Eteri was baking Khalva (special cake baked by Adjarian Muslims for religious festivals) every week to remember her diseased son. She was whispering prayers several times a day, while watching TV, just laying on the sofa or even cooking. However, she never knelt and performed *Namaz* in a traditional manner. Her daughter-in-law, Anjela told me that she was not baptized as an Orthodox Christian but she usually celebrates Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter) as well as Muslim holidays (Kurban Bayram). Anjela has three children. One of them, 5th grader Mishiko wants to keep Ramadan, while his elder 17 year-old brother wants to be baptized in the Orthodox Church. This short vignette illustrates how religion and culture are diffused into each other in the context of Kobuleti. It may also give an idea, why the Roma may experience discomfort by declaring some practices as sins.

3.4. Pentecostal Commitment: Occupation

As I already discussed, in order to become a *full* convert, one should jettison vestiges of the previous sinful nature. In the light of this, conversion is a costly enterprise; benefits of conversion should outweigh losses caused by complete break. I suggest that the Roma's desire to affiliate themselves with *converts*, *half-converts* or *non-converts*, converges with the perception of religious commitment as an occupation. I also argue that their "pragmatism" is a sign of their mistrust towards conversion ideology and different values about money.

3.4.1. Preaching and Money for Converts and Other Roma

The pastor's assistant Luda points out: "I was working before... trading... then I left everything and said: God, now I will serve you, and God helps me." In contrast, 37 year-old non-convert Vova notes: "If I were living with God rules, I would be holding the bible now and preaching. When you go to this church, you are preaching, spreading the word of God to save other people. It is your job!" Both refer to Pentecostal commitment as an *occupation*. In the first case, Luda does not acknowledge that she is getting any payment for her "work" or any material reward; the only benefit is that she has a privileged status of "saved". This can be regarded what Bourdieu (1998) calls *misrecognition*. Her position is ambiguous and this ambiguity makes her commitment perceived as divine, disentangled from utilitarian intentions. The pastor also stresses that his job does not give him any material benefits; even his international networks do not support him financially. When I ask about a new car, he classifies it as a gift, but it is not a reciprocal item in return for his efforts to evangelize others. This interpretation is corresponding to Bourdieu's definition of "sacred tasks" (1998:117) when the duality of worship/work is denied and making secret explicit is a taboo (1998:97). In contrast to the church leaders' narratives, Vova breaks down this "duality of mutually exclusive truths", demystifies the sacred job of preachers by denoting it as a regular occupation for which one is financially rewarded. Consequently, this inconsistency between interpretations of the church and the laity sparks tension in the community. Some Roma accuse the church leaders in getting financial assistance from abroad and making fortune at their expense. On the other hand, preachers are extremely offended by this allegation.

This aspect leads to the issue of the value of money for the Roma. 23 year-old Jambuli in interview points out: "They [Pentecostals] save money, we splurge! For instance, I buy five packs of cigarette a day. They do not smoke and this money goes to the pocket, and the pocket grows bigger and bigger." The Roma's non-pragmatic attitude towards money is

emphasized even by their Georgian neighbors. One of them, a shopkeeper's wife tells me: "They buy food in my store; I see that every evening they take a lot of food of a good sort, fruits, candies, cookies. The Roma would not eat the meal cooked on the previous day!" The same thing told me Luda, the Roma street-seller: "I spend the whole money which I earn during a day on food in the evening." This kind of approach stands in opposition with the Pentecostal economy, according to which money has to be accumulated and spent for good reasons; wealth is not an end but a by-product of a correct life-style. Simon Coleman (2000) argues that money in global Evangelical communities is constantly in circulation; it cannot "be stored and rendered immobile" (2000:197). The *tithe*: giving the tenth part of weekly or monthly income to the congregation, the church or a fellow believer is an investment into its future usage. Hence, the bigger the congregation the bigger the volume of economic capital it can accrue. In this light, money is consecrated; it is one of the manifestations of an individual's righteousness.

The system of *tithe* which I mentioned is controversial in the Roma community. Several times at cell meetings I saw how preachers are collecting money after the gathering. I also contributed several coins. Usually the Roma can not give out a lot, and obviously cell meetings do not make the church rich. After the sermon, preachers bless collected money and ask God to make them spend it for kind reasons. Because of different value systems, on the one hand money is an indicator of righteousness (for Evangelicals) and on the other hand, for the Roma it is detached from sacred meaning. Hence, in the light of Bourdieu's concept of *misrecognition*, consecrating money and perceiving it as a reward for divine work must create a tension.

Prior to going back to the issue of *occupation*, I need to provide the description of social conditions in which the Roma live nowadays. In Kobuleti, men from more than half of the Roma families do not work regularly. Mostly women are the breadwinners. They eke out

living by selling female tights and shoes in streets. Once every two weeks they go to the capital, which is approximately 5-6 hours drive away by car, buy there packages of goods in large bulk for trade and sell them either in Batumi, the capital of Adjara, or take the packages to another cities and wholesale them there. I accompanied women several times on street-selling. They make from GEL 20 (9.50 Euro) to GEL 40 (19 Euro) a day. When they go wholesaling, they make approximately GEL 80 (38 Euro) a day, but it happens once a week or in two weeks. Men mostly complain that there are no goods to sell (*Tovara net!*). One of my informants, Eka (27) says about her husband: “It is more difficult for men to trade. They would not sell female shoes and three bottles of perfume, right? It would be shameful”. As it is evident, jobs are gender-divided. Men either have a respectable job, which means trading “considerable goods” and not petty-trade, or they better stay at home. The main hindrance to envisage an alternative option is illiteracy: The most Roma can not read and write in Georgian. However, nowadays even those families, where parents are illiterate, send children to school so that “in future they are able to get a job and earn on living” (Sveta 55).

On the one hand, the association of religious affiliation with wage labor must work as a sign of stability and revenue for the Roma. On the other hand, considering the soviet legacy, it might be reminiscent of the period when the salvation of the marginal ethnic group was imaginable only through mandatory work. In Eastern and Central Europe (Barany 2002:137) as well as in the Soviet Union (Marushiakova, Popov 2003) sedentarization and forced labor policies aimed at turning the Roma into disciplined citizens (Gog 2012:319). During the Brezhnev era in the Soviet Union they indulged in “profiteering” on big markets. *Tsigany* were trading all kinds of goods clandestinely on vast territories by chiseling off the bureaucratic barriers and making a good fortune (Marushiakova, Popov 2003). Even my informants refer frequently to the past “when they [parents and grandparents] were trading, had money and thought that they always would be like this” (Jambuli 23). Nowadays, when

the market is free and there is a tiny shop almost in front of every house, they admit it is difficult to make a fortune by petty-trade. Despite the fact, that today having a job is not mandatory by law; it has become a social necessity.

Those Roma who have already an occupation, who trade or clean streets, claim they do not have time to invest into regular church practices. In their words, they can not have two occupations at the same time, and the one which feeds is crucial. 27 year-old Eka, the mother of two children says: “When I am back, I just want to have coffee or tea, and then I have to spend time with children too...” Another informant 37 year-old Kolya is a guitarist. He is giving private lessons of guitar and he is also a member of a newly formed musical band *Mix* which has four other Roma and one Georgian member. They are rehearsing almost every day in the school building. Georgian principal of the school last year allocated them a space where they could play. This year she founded a NGO, implemented a project and received the funding to help young Roma musicians with musical instruments and record Roma oral songs. The band members get some salary too. Those members, Kolya and his friend Iura, who were visiting church before, but now started playing in the band, stopped attending church gatherings. Pastor Aslanov complains that they are ungrateful towards God, since when one of them was dying because of alcoholism, he accepted the Lord and was asking him for assistance, but now he has forgotten the church. Kolya, who converted about seven years ago points out: “Some time ago I was thinking that I could preach as well. But then I changed my mind. God gave me a talent so I can express it in my music.” This quote is illuminating for understanding the implications of a full conversion for the Roma. Kolya considers himself Christian but he is not a practicing believer, which again means he is not deemed by others as fully convert.

Evangelizing and procreating missionary labor force is one of the obligations of neo-protestants (Wanner 2007); they have to spread the word among other people who have not

known living God. When I asked the pastor what would happen if I fulfill Ten Commandments and fully submit myself to God, but do not evangelize, “will I be saved?” - He replied that not everybody has a talent to preach or be a pastor; the most important thing is a regular self-discipline and church-attendance. However, Vova (37) perceives, if he is a fully convert he has to preach as well, otherwise, without preaching it does not make sense to be a full convert and break from the past. This account highlights the discrepancy between the pastor’s view of preaching as a vocation and the Roma’s perception of “born-again” as a complete new way of life which includes preaching as an occupation. This also ties up with Bourdieu’s (1998) concept of *misrecognition*, according to which preaching would not be considered as a regular wage labor.

Further on, I will explain, what impedes some Roma from envisaging preaching as *their* job, apart from the fact, that they already might have an occupation which is more or less satisfactory.

3.4.2. Hierarchy and Social Structure

As I already sketched out, Aslanov’s position in the community is conceived with ambivalence: On the one hand, Roma acknowledge him as a spiritual leader, giving an example of individual transformation through God’s agency. Being a role model, he exerts a symbolic power; he is the person who leads a different life-style and stands at a higher step of the social ladder. On the other hand, after examining closer, in longer informal conversations the Roma start complaining about his superior economic and social status. 37 year-old Slavik stresses that other Roma do not have access to resources which are provided only to the pastor:

He [Pastor Roma] is working for them [Pentecostal Church]. He is rewarded for it. It is his job, but what can I get?...He comes, takes pictures of us and sends them abroad. He has a computer which was intended for us! But now his grandchild is playing on it! He eats *Sgushonka* and bread every day... Comfortable life, ha?

Slavik is a non-convert. The main reason why he opposes Aslanov's church is the absence of benefits he can get at the expense of cutting all ties with his "previous self." As other non-converts he does not see himself a proper person who can evangelize. He claims he believes in God, but going to church would not "feed his family." Non-converts who accentuate unequal access to resources openly express their unfriendly position. Slavik enthusiastically shows me the pastor's brother who is affected by tuberculosis and lives in a half-destroyed hut. He wants to prove that the pastor does not care about his relatives. (I found out that he was sent to asylum several times but then escaped, today his sister is fetching him food). Others also mention the pastor's privileges, a car which he got as a present, a computer "which in fact was sent to all Roma, not only to him".

At first glance, it is not convincing to talk about hierarchy in the Pentecostal communities, because generally Pentecostal churches function without hierarchical structure (Slavkova 2003). They often mobilize congregation within their kinship who later start evangelizing and bolster the laity. Then they often splinter, plant new churches, attract more and more parish, and with the help of the networks diffuse all over the world. There is no vertical structure of hierarchy. However in the small community of Kobuleti with around 100 residents, dynamics of Pentecostal practice at the local level give a different picture. In the similar vein, Slavkova (2003) talks about influential pastors in Bulgaria who control everyday lives of their congregants and influence even their electoral choices or professional occupations. In Kobuleti the pastor Aslanov is a person who already has an established position in the community; he recruited the leader of the youth group (Nushkin 23) and a female assistant Luda. He is frequently complaining that people do not attend services and he calls on them to "live in God", but at the same time he is a person in the neighborhood

wielding social capital (Bourdieu 1986): the networks in Sweden who reward him for his job, shepherding other Roma.

Above I have elaborated how the social structure of power relations is reproduced through the ideology of ‘born-again’. From the pragmatic perspective, *incomplete* Roma seem to be satisfied with their status, it is a form of negotiation between rupture and continuity which allows them to maneuver across the margins; one day they attend the church gathering and the next day they go to the cemetery and remember their dead. However, I argue that it is a superficial understanding of social and cultural circumstances which are embedded in the Roma’s relationship towards the church and outside world. They appropriate the Pentecostal language of salvation and talk about themselves and their position in society from converts’ perspective. They accept the status of incomplete persons within given boundaries. Incomplete people can not go to heaven, moreover, their incompleteness is visible in this world through apparent signs: the way of life, individual and cultural sins. Those who stay aloof, point to the hierarchy and unequal distribution of resources: conditions which make them feel excluded from the community of converts. The tension between the church and non-converts is fostered by denoting preachers’ occupation as wage labor which is not recognized as such by the church itself.

Conclusion

Through this thesis I have shown how the Pentecostal Church in one particular community shapes the relationships between converts, half-converts and non-converts. First, I argued that conversion is not a unidirectional process. In spite of the fact that pastor Aslanov's narrative of conversion illustrates a popular dichotomy between before and after, the majority of the Roma talk about continuity with their past. Contrary to Smilde's (2007) proposition of imaginative rationality, I argued that the Roma cannot act as rational agents to maximize their future benefits and I suggest why it is not possible in this particular case.

Very often the Roma families cannot break away from individual sins, such as drinking, smoking and leading leisure way of life. These individual stories are also embedded in cultural practices, like visiting the dead at cemeteries, which are denoted as worshipping idols, unacceptable for the church. The poignant step of baptism with water deters them, since they know that after conversion one should stay "pure". By promoting the ideology of rupture, the Pentecostal church requires cleavage with cultural elements which are not identified as "religious". It is a difficult process, especially taking into account the soviet legacy and "folklorization" of religion. During the atheist regime many rituals were redefined and preserved in the form of feasts, hence what Pentecostals call demonical, might be just a quest for continuity with the past. Going to the cemetery and having there a feast is not purely Orthodox, Muslim or some kind of *religious* ritual. Tracing roots of its origin is not important in our case. The Roma say that they do these rituals because their forefathers did. It seems it is important for them to continue this tradition despite the fact that they are rendered *incomplete*. For the Roma this is a strategy of coping with social institutions, rather than a rational choice of free individuals acting without structural constraints.

The accounts of non-converts illuminate another aspect of the Pentecostal Church's position in the community. By employing Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) theory of symbolic economy, I showed how the tension between the laity and the church unfolds. The pastor and two other preachers do not acknowledge that they get any material benefit for their service; it is only a by-product of living in God. Bourdieu (1998) points out that *misrecognition* of commercial interests is embedded within collective work of the clergy. Despite the fact, that his theory pertains to the Catholic Church, it can be incorporated into my case as well. A preachers' job is considered by the non-convert Roma as wage labor which does not converge with the pastor's view of preaching as a vocation endowed by the Lord. In Bourdieu's words, the demystification of the church's role in society leads to breaking down its spiritual bases, removing the taboo of making things explicit (1998:113-122), the point which makes it perceive as "church." This tension is triggered not only by the fact that the Roma are simply envious of the pastor, but they also have different values of money. For Pentecostals money is a means of "sacred bargain" and reciprocal relationship with God: the more one dedicates to the church, the more will be returned in future. In contrast, for the non-convert Roma, money is something which should be spent non-rationally rather than purposefully accumulated.

The third aspect of my argument pertains to informal hierarchy reproduced in the community. Since the community is small, niches of the church leaders and the laity are defined without explicitly articulating this stratification. The leader of the church already has a rich social capital: networks abroad who assure his material stability, other Roma can not compete for the same resources taking into account that mostly they are illiterate and also, not everybody has a vocation to preach. My empirical data partially gives answer to the theoretical question whether the Roma can choose Pentecostalism rationally and empower themselves by adopting a new culture. Stemming from the accounts of my informants, I

believe that conversion and the idea of rebirth reproduces the structure of inequality where some people are complete, successful entrepreneurs and others are incomplete, eventually doomed to sinfulness.

Appendices



Gellauri District, Kobuleti - Several Roma families live in these Ruins.



The pastor Aslanov in front of his house-church - Kobuleti.



Cell meeting at the Pastor's sister's house – Kobuleti.



Healing ritual at one of the cell meetings – Kobuleti.



Roma street-sellers with their cargo.



Some non-convert Roma keep icons next to family portraits.

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