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CONVERSION NARRATIVES, SINCERE HEARTS, AND OTHER TANGIBLE SIGNS

Communicating Religious Change among the Transylvanian Roma¹

László FOSZTÓ

INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is often followed by personal transformation of the convert and of his/her social relations. Analysts have pointed out the centrality of the conversion narrative in these self-transformative attempts (Snow and Machalek 1983; Stromberg 1993). In this paper my starting point is similar to that of the analysts, but I take the argument one step further: I start with an analysis of the ritualised narrative that accompanies conversion but subsequently develop my analysis to other (non-verbal) aspects of the conversion, considering social constraints on the performance of the narrative and other self-transformative attempts based on ethnographical data. Empirically speaking, I am concerned with the maintenance and transformation of the moral self in the context of religious conversion among a group of Roma from Romania who live in the Cluj area, Transylvania.²

The study of religious conversion is an expanding subfield within the anthropology of religion (see recent volumes: Buckser and Glazier 2003; Hefner 1993; Lamb and Bryant 1999; van der Veer 1996), but the commencement of anthropological studies of conversion can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s (Goody 1975; Horton 1971; Peel 1968). At that time, the debate focused especially on the problem of tradition (in Africa) versus modernity. Special attention was paid to differences in the modes of thought, and particularly to the role of rationality in different societies (see Horton 1993). More recent debates (Coleman 2000; Lehman 1998; Robbins 2004b; van der Veer 1996) centre on the relative similarities and divergences of social processes observed across regions where conversions are increasingly commonplace. The scope of conversion studies has been broadened to consider transformations of other 'world religions'. Some analysts adopted the concept of 'multiple modernities' in order to explain parallel

transformations observable in Christian, Islamic, and Hindu societies (Eisenstadt 2002; Hefner 1998; van der Veer 2002), and there are many recent ethnographies from nearly every region of the world. In addition to African societies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; 1997; Meyer 1999; Peel 2000), Latin American (Chesnut 1997; 2003), European (Coleman 2000), Papua New Guinean (Robbins 2004a), and post-Soviet societies (Pelkmans, et al. 2005; Wanner 2003; 2004) have also been studied, and likewise, comparative analyses are available (Lehman 2001). The problem of *modernity* seems to be an enduring issue within conversion studies. Nevertheless interpretations of the concept of modernity and approaches to the process of modernisation encompass a wide theoretical range.

At one end of this theoretical spectrum we find works adopting primarily individual-oriented, cultural or psychological models that focus on changing ideas and practices related to the construction of personhood, self, community, and commitment. The methodology of such studies usually focuses on linguistic aspects of social behaviour such as religious rhetoric and conversion narratives (Harding 1987; 2000; Stromberg 1993), or, more broadly, on changes in representational practices amongst the converted (Keane 2002). At the other end of the spectrum are explanations emphasising the importance of dynamic socio-political contexts and the political economy of conversion. These models are often supplemented by historical discussions of the changing socio-political context of religious expansion.³ Other approaches can be placed between these poles; reconstructions of the 'religious encounters' between natives and missionaries (Peel 2000) and inquiries into the translation of ideas (Keane 1997; Meyer 1999) are often supported by documents, procured principally from the archives of missionary societies. Those authors who take such an approach provide conscientious reconstructions of the historical interactions that took place in missionary encounters, while criticising socio-political accounts of conversion for their purported economic determinism and neglect of 'local voices'.⁴

My own approach is closer to the first pole, though I advocate a perspective that integrates the communicative practices observable in conversion into the wider context of ritual communication emerging in the post-socialist era. Some authors contend that conversion narratives should be viewed as a key component to the transformations of self that are inherent to conversion, and not simply as retrospective accounts of the phenomena itself (Snow and Machalek 1983; Stromberg 1993). I am interested in how alterations to individual communicative practices and relationships brought about by religious conversion lead to more general personal transformations. I proceed by analysing both verbal and non-verbal aspects of conversion and, furthermore, describe the social contexts, which support or subvert attempts at expressing converted personhood. The wider social and economic changes transpiring in post-socialist Romania are connected to practices and ideas of conversion and other religious practices. I trace the link between different levels of social organisation through an ethnography of communicative practices.

Conversion narratives contain features of performance (see Austin 1976); they are not simply accounts of past events, rather their performance creates and maintains the act of conversion. The impact of the conversion narrative on personhood is considerable, but my analysis of conversion will not solely be confined to the verbal

aspects (i.e. the narrative) of the act. I would like to single out a problem here; while analysts of conversion stories recognise the importance of the narration in transforming the converts' personal identity, and demonstrate the impact of conversion on the self (Stromberg 1993), they do not pay enough attention to the ways in which narration and other verbal actions are embedded in and transform the social world of converts and how these transformative performances can act as social constraints.

I approach conversion as a form or ritual that includes both verbal and non-verbal elements. I define the performance of the narrative as part of a ritual sequence, and therefore the connection between the performance and social context must be described and analysed. If conversion narratives are seen as part of a broader domain of ritualised communication, non-verbal ritual codes (i.e. dressing, gestures, visible changes in consumption, etc.) must be included in the analysis. Indeed, both verbal and non-verbal aspects are integral parts of the communicative practices which undergo changes in the process of conversion. Moreover, the pragmatic aspects of this transformed communication should be analysed because they reveal the interconnectedness of the converted person to the immediate social structures that either undermine or support his or her attempt at self-transformation. Identifying the social limits on ritual communication reveals how, in some contexts, the willingness or unwillingness of a convert to retell his or her conversion narrative, and, alternatively, the willingness or unwillingness of an audience to listen are part of a dialogical construction of moral personhood.

For my analysis of conversion amongst the Roma, the most relevant connection is with the work of Paloma Gay y Blasco.⁵ Through her case study of the Gitanos of Madrid, Gay y Blasco demonstrates how the group maintains its identity via an everyday focus on personhood. Gitanos neither subordinate the individual to the group nor link 'Gypsiness' to communal unity and solidarity. Their emphasis is rather on a specific modality of moral personhood existing in each and every Gitano man and woman, and that is distinct from that found in non-Gitanos (*Payos*). An "awareness of each other as moral beings" underpins the Gitano community (Gay y Blasco 1999: 41). Gay y Blasco discusses the impact of Evangelical Christian conversion on this ideal of morality and suggests that conversion reinforces some aspects of the distinctive Gitano morality. In this sense converts become "better Gitanos", while a new sense of community simultaneously emerges, which extends group solidarity further than the narrow boundaries of kinship, which was the main organising principle for non-converted Gitanos.

The structure of this paper is as follows: I start with a case study of a convert and his narrative about his encounter with God. I seek to demonstrate the role of narration in the performative transformation of personhood. I analyse the limitations of such transformative attempts through another case study. The third section is an analysis of a debate about a biblical passage and explores social constraints on conversion attempts, through a consideration of the problem of social rejection of transformative narrations (together with the denial of the feasibility of a born-again personhood). The fourth section is concerned with the 'tangible signs' of actions or attitudes, which are not primarily communicative or are communicated indirectly. The fifth section focuses on emerging spiritual kinship-ties, practices, and ideals. My conclusions point to the importance of the changing social orientation of the converted self.

CONVERSION NARRATIVES: SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF THE PERSON

In this section I quote passages from a long autobiographical narrative by 'Dani', a middle-aged male convert who is a Pentecostal⁶ preacher in Gánás. Dani was born in Gánás to a very poor Roma family and spent part of his life outside the village. We became acquainted as soon as I started to visit the Pentecostal gatherings that were regularly held in a house in Dani's neighbourhood. I was already familiar with some events from his narrative because he often included personal examples and testimonies in his preaching. I asked Dani if he would tell me the 'whole story', and he agreed. He is trilingual, as are most of local Roma, but before we started to record his narrative Dani told me that he would only speak Romanian for the interview; 'This is the language in which I can speak about my encounter with God' – he added. His choice of using a single language rather than the usual composite of quotations in various languages indicated that this was to be a special narrative form, more ritualised than everyday narratives. The relatively mono-vocal narration also conferred more authority upon Dani in his account of the past, and, as I will argue, Dani's mono-lingual performance acted to emphasise his transformed personhood in the present. The following narrative is a product of our interaction in a supportive environment; Dani's own house in the presence of his wife and a few other sympathetic listeners. Sometimes I intervened with short questions, but the construction of the whole of the narration was clearly under Dani's control.

Dani:

Maybe God wanted it to be like this: because if God hadn't put me to suffering I might not have turned to God, and probably I would never know him. Probably I wouldn't be a convert (Rou: pocăit)⁷ as I am now.

In my life, before I converted, I would drink one or two glasses of brandy, like every man. But I was stupid when I was drunk. If somebody insulted me, I beat him and cut him, I did ... the devil carried me (Rou: dracul m-a purtat). And once I was in Zalău, because then I was living there at Poarta Sălajului. I was married there. I was a son-in-law there. And there were some wicked people: some tent-dwelling Gypsies (Rou: țigani corturari) with big moustaches and long hair. And those Gypsies would come there when we would be drinking with my brother-in-law at my mother-in-law's house. They came and they scoffed at us... because they said we are Gypsy-like... anyway... Then on a Saturday afternoon I started to drink there, and those Gypsies came and started to quarrel with us. We were drunk... the other guy owed some money to my brother-in-law, the guy who we killed, because we killed one of them... (...)

I was condemned to 16 years in prison. I had been in prison several times before, but I never had gotten a big punishment. I was frightened, when I heard that I was getting 16 years, I was frightened. (How old were you?) Me? I was then 35. Then I said: Lord, if you will set me free I will change (Rou: o să mă întorc), I will convert, I will serve you for the rest of my life. But as I knelt down, the guard saw me through a small window and took me out to the lobby. That was a real beating I received! 'So you are praying here? Didn't you have time to pray while you were outside? You are praying here in order to show the thieves you are a believer!' He beat me. But I continued to pray day and night to God, I was asking him to help me get free.

The man who had beaten me, the same policeman... because I had no education, I wasn't able to read or write... But at once God put the intention in his mind and on his heart (Rou: a pus în minte și în inima), and he returned to me, as he saw me continuously praying and crying. I was desperate and I was not eating. He came and asked me: 'Don't you have the right to appeal?' I said to the sergeant: 'Sir, I cannot read and I cannot write.' He took me out to the lobby and put a chair next to a table because he felt pity for me as desperate as I was and I was crying. He said: 'Listen, I'm going to prepare an application for you. Request an appeal, but keep in mind what you now declare to me, because I take it down, and after three months when you are called for the hearing, you must say the same. If you make even a small mistake it will be bad for you. You might forget...' I told him everything. I dictated everything without a devious word because if they were to catch me lying at the appeal, I probably even could have gotten additional years. He filed the appeal, and they took the application to Bucharest. After three months I received the decision. The guard came: 'Have you filed an appeal? Prepare your pack for the trip. You will go to the hearing.' I prayed throughout these three months: 'Lord, you know that I have no education. Lord, help me to speak there. Because there are a lot of people, I might get scared. But you, my God, you can help me. You've always helped me.'

My brother, when I was there at the court, there were eighteen of us. Eighteen people were there for appeals. Who knows how it happened, because I was the last, from the beginning, but we had gotten there who knows how, and they took the files and I was the first. You know, how could this happen? As they took the files those that were on top came out at the bottom and mine came first. When we reached the courthouse, we were all in chains, and they called my name. I stood up, there was such a crowd there... there were more than five hundred people. He asked me a question. The judge asked me if I admitted to all the declarations that had been recorded after my arrest. I do not want to praise myself, let the praise be for God, I was even in prison before and I was aware of all the laws... It is not good to be in prison, but it is good to know a bit of hardship... I started courageously: Sir, and honoured Supreme Court, I recognise only one of the declarations: the last one. Except this last declaration I can recognise none. 'Look, they are all signed.' 'They are signed because I was obliged to sign. I was desperate; I was desperate because of the beating I received. I was obliged to sign what they told me to sign!' 'But here in front of you, I know that you are here to interrogate, and solve our problems, I know that you are here and you will not beat me...' And then I explained this, and this... and then he took that book, and turned the pages, and the judges discussed something. 'Sit down!' ... They were listening to the others. 'Wait outside in the lobby because I will give the result immediately.' Then we waited outside and a sergeant came: 'Who is S. Dani?' 'I am, at your command.' He said: 'Prisoner S. Dani you have 8 years to serve.' (Reduced to half...) Yes. They changed my punishment because I was classified anew (Rou: mi s-a schimbat încadrarea) (...)

But you see, I went out to work. On a Saturday when we were outside I asked the commander: 'Sir, if I were to work, from my eight years, how much would remain?' And I explained: 'I had sixteen years and the Supreme Court reduced my punishment, and I was left with eight. Now I would like to go out to work

in order to gain some days, if I go, how much can I reduce from these eight?' 'What is your occupation?' 'I am a mason.' 'We need masons. You are the only one.' And then they took me out to work as a mason, and he said: 'From the eight years you will remain for four. And you are free! But you must have good conduct and no reports, because if you get a report, that will be added when you are released and you will stay six more months, or nine months, or even a year, depending on the report.' My brother, I had such good conduct that in four years I had no reports. God saved me, praise him, and that is why I converted. I converted because I saw the love of God. After all that I had done in the prison, how much I had sold, how I was fighting, how much bad I had done there... and I had no reports, because God took care of me. I was fasting. I fasted twice a week. (When?) Tuesday and Friday... And God saw me: Look this is in suffering, and even in suffering he is fasting, praise the Lord. That is why I converted. (...)

When I returned from prison I forgot about God. If a brother-in-law would come, or a friend or a relative, I would start to drink and I had forgotten God. Six months passed like this. After six months I started to drink even harder. I was beating this poor woman... how much she got it, God forbid. The drinks did it, not because I was a bad man. I was not bad, but when I drank the devil worked. And listen now: because now comes the thing!

I was attending the assembly... (Who encouraged you to go?) ... just me alone. (But there, while you were inside were people coming to you to talk? To teach...) Yes, they came. But they came to talk about God, not to teach me. (Who were they?) Some converts came on Sundays, and they took us out, those who wanted to come... (Were they Pentecostals?) Pentecostals... But I knew before... I even went to congregations. And then I went to the assembly. And when I went to the assembly I liked it, but I was not able to pray. Because if you have no education, just: Help me God! You know my God! Help me God! I was not able to say more. (...) When I would come home from church, I would drink two-three decilitres of brandy and even put a bottle in my pocket. I came home and drank. Six months passed again, I went to the assembly and I drank. I was drinking and smoking.

But one night, after six months, because the Bible says: he who is in God's plan to convert, God will convert him even from his mother's womb. Whether you want it or not, you will be a convert! The Bible says that. Because if you do not want it, he will put you on a bed of suffering (Rou: patul de suferința), and from the bed of suffering you will cry: Lord if you help me I will convert! Like I was in prison: Lord, if you liberate me I will convert, and since then God has not let me down. God saw that I was drinking and fighting... I was fighting with the Gypsies and attending the assembly!

And then, one night at two o' clock the face of Jesus Christ appeared to me. I have a book, I can show you... Jesus was wearing a mantle and he was coming through the air. And I heard a voice. I heard a voice: 'How long do you want to continue like this?' I got up, and woke her [the wife]. We kneeled down: and then I got scared indeed. I said then: 'Lord, starting from today...' It was dark; I had not turned the light on. I said: Lord if I do not serve you truly, put my mouth on my nape. If I put drinks in my mouth or smoke. Whatever will be in my life, I will convert. And thank my Heavenly Father since I made this

covenant with him... I would say in vain to you or to Misi... You do not need to know me... I want God to know me! Because... people are enemies. People say bad things about you, but I do not care what the world says, because the Bible says: If you want to be saved, do not look to the right or look to the left, look ahead. (...)

After a week I felt very, very bad: I wanted to smoke, I wanted to drink. But if you take an oath in front of God (Rou: jurămînt în fața lui Dumnezeu) you must be very ambitious... because I was a hard drinker. But thank God that I said: Lord, I feel like drinking, and I feel like smoking, but how bad these are! I know you do not like these, because when Jesus Christ came to save us, to clean sin, he did not come with drinks and cigarettes in his pockets, to distribute to the drinkers and smokers. No, he came to reject cigarettes and drinks. Because only in this way can you turn to the Word of God.

(From whom did you learn?) I tell you that too: while we had children around, I could not pray at home, because children are children, especially if you are a convert, you cannot hurt a child. When I was going to the forest to collect wood I knelt down and prayed: 'Lord, I have no education. Lord I don't know. Lord, teach me! If you want me to be a convert and to serve you all my life, teach me!' And then, I took the Bible in my hand, and I could not recognise the letters. I knew none of the letters. And I looked into the Bible and I was crying. I was crying and crying and my tears were flowing on the Bible. I said how good it would be to know what is written here... Lord it would be very good to know what it says here. Lord, I converted in vain if you do not grant me understanding to know what your Word says. Lord, teach me Lord! Show me that you are God, show me now, because if you show me now that you will teach me to read, I will believe in you even more. Isn't it a big thing to learn to read at fifty years old when I didn't attend school at all. Not even for a minute. I wasn't at school. It passed two months like this. I couldn't get anything... And once as I took the Bible in my hand, I opened to John 3. And I looked there and at once I read: Jesus and Nicodemus... And then I asked Józsi, I asked him first: 'Józsi come tell me what it says here.' But I said nothing that I had read... He says: Jesus and Nicodemus... when I heard this my hair rose on my head. I would learn to read! I didn't sleep all night. I stayed up with the light on and I read the Bible. This was on a Saturday. In the morning, the next morning, it was Sunday, and I spoke in the assembly... I took the Bible and I knelt down, and I prayed to God. Everyone knew that I couldn't read. But when I started to read from the Bible everybody was amazed. 'You couldn't read!' 'I couldn't, but God is good.' And with him you can do whatever you want; if you are a believer and you say: let this forest move, the forest will move. And God has taught me, my brother. And I thank God, because without any school, without any education, without any teaching ... not taught by anybody... nothing at all! (And the pastors didn't teach you?) When I was at church he wouldn't speak to me personally (Yes...), he preached to everybody, but I listened in vain, because what I would hear from him, in two-three days I would forget. (Yes...) But God purged me... he made me pure, and when God saw that I walk his paths and I want to be a real convert, God gave me understanding (Rou: pricepere). Do you realise that without any education you will go among three to four hundred people and preach the Word of God? It is a big thing, my dear Laci.

One main motive of this narrative is the recurrent demand on Dani to speak in public: Dani repeatedly presents situations where he is expected and compelled to speak. This motive can be interpreted from the present identity of Dani as a preacher; his self-construction as a person who has become a public speaker. Throughout the narration his personal development is connected to suffering and the intervention of God. This motive emphasises Dani's personal development through a continuous overcoming of obstacles. As Dani puts it: "It is good to know a bit of hardship..." He might be considered a 'self-made man', but divine support is always involved. This is particularly salient in the culminant point of his personal development, when Dani is able to read and begins to understand the Scripture (Rou: *pricepe*) the changes he is undergoing are already beyond his influence. According to his narrative, only God could teach him to read. Dani's account of this radical change disconnects his achievement from his abilities and skills, and transforms the event into a miracle: achieving wisdom without learning or education. This idea is consistent with the traditional Roma form of constructing personhood in an individualist and authority-defying manner, but also contains a resigned acceptance that without divine intervention, his condition could not have changed.

Another particularity of this narrative is the symbolic rupture that separates sinful past behaviour from the virtuous present person. This dualistic construction of conversion narratives has been remarked on by other researchers (Snow and Machalek 1983). Throughout his narration not only does Dani reject his pre-conversion behaviour, he also asserts a continuity in his character. The tension between these implicit statements is resolved by the presence of evil influences in his life: 'Not because I was a bad man, but [because] the devil worked'. Conversely, the point of rupture and Dani's new, converted personhood is supported by the continuous presence of God. Dani attributes his initial suffering that triggered his conversion to God, who he sees working in the lives of other characters mentioned in the story. The apex of Dani's relationship with God occurred when he had a vision one night. For Dani, the apparition of Jesus signals God's care for Dani's own personal development: 'He for whom it is in God's plan to convert, God will convert even from his mother's womb'. This divine sign scares Dani and he responds by submitting himself and making a 'covenant' with God.

In Dani's narrative, conversion is presented as having social consequences: Dani refuses to consider the opinions of others, instead focusing solely on his connection with God. He seeks to 'understand' and enact religious ideals: 'If you want to be saved, don't look to the right or to the left, look ahead'. Such radical decisions and personal changes need not be central to a conversion narrative. This emphasis on radical change and rupture indicates that the new personhood of the convert is still embedded in his earlier commitments. The spiritual and social process of conversion is initiated by a covenant with God, and repeated public performances of the conversion narrative are necessary (though not sufficient) for the convert to gain social acceptance as a new person.

RELUCTANT CONVERT: CAUGHT IN FAMILY TIES

Róza:

Róza, a Roma in her sixties, was one of my neighbours in the village. For a good part of my stay I was not aware that Róza was a Pentecostal convert. After I learned that she had converted in the early 90s, I asked her about the circumstances surrounding her conversion, and she recounted her and her family's story. In addition to eliciting her conversion narrative, I spoke with other members of her family who seemed to share Róza's view of many of the events surrounding her conversion.

The process was set in motion when Róza became severely ill. She was taken to the city hospital where a doctor told her that she had leukaemia. Her family knew that this was a deadly disease, and her three daughters cried in desperation. She was taken home where she was confined to her bed for months on end, losing weight and unable to move on her own. Her family resigned itself to the fact that she would die in a matter of weeks.

Róza was divinely inspired to seek out the healing practices of Pentecostalism. She recounts how the idea came to her during a long night of 'discussions with the Lord'. God told her to go to a Romanian-run Pentecostal church in the city, where, during the powerful public prayer session, she would be healed. Róza's family attributed her intentions to confusion brought on by her suffering and was unwilling to bring her to the city. One of her married daughters had strong objections to her mother's wish to abandon her old religion. Shortly after this, the daughter nevertheless decided, under the influence of a dream, that Róza should be taken to a Pentecostal assembly.

Róza was taken to her sister's home in the city in preparation to being taken to the church. Róza's brother-in-law worked in construction industry and had Pentecostal colleagues. He invited them to come pray for Róza. Róza believes that "the Lord was working" since her first contact with the Pentecostals. She was finally able to sleep well after months of being unable to do so. After a few days she was taken to the church and there, was healed. Her strength returned as she took part in the collective prayer. She "received Jesus" during the same service, and after several months she was baptised.

Her journey as a convert remained unfulfilled because when the Holy Spirit came to give her the gift of tongues and prophecy, she could not get the "baptism in the Spirit".⁸ Still staying with her sister, one evening Róza felt the presence of the Holy Spirit coming on, but her husband stopped her from speaking in tongues so as to avoid frightening the children. Disturbed by this, the Holy Spirit departed and Róza received only 'the seal' (Hun: "*le voltam pecsételve*").⁹ She blames her husband for not supporting her in her attempt to be baptised by the Holy Spirit, but she says (and her husband confirmed this) that he was scared by the changes she underwent during the visitation of the Holy Spirit.

Other members of Róza's family were also adherents of Pentecostalism, though none of them had fully converted. Her husband had regularly visited an assembly for months. He was almost baptised, but "there were no application forms that day", and that day Róza's brother-in-law called him, half seriously inviting him to "have some more drinks together and pay some more visits to the chicks". Thus, Róza's husband remained unconverted. Soon after Róza's baptism, her daughter (the same daughter who

had the divinely inspired dream) became ill. Her ailment was due to satanic influence and could not be diagnosed by medical doctors. She was taken to and healed at the same church at which her mother had been healed. She received Jesus and was to be baptised, but her husband, a musician, told her that he would divorce her if she joined the Pentecostals. Róza took her daughter's case to the Pentecostal assembly and explained to the converted brothers (Hun: *hívőtestvérek*) that her daughter could not be baptised because it would destroy her family (she and her husband had two young children at that time). The assembly agreed that it would be unwise to break apart the family: "Nevertheless, God wouldn't leave her alone." – they commented. The later material success (house, car, etc.) of Róza's daughter's family is attributed by Róza to divine help, but she also fears that the time for admonition (Hun: *dorgálás*) will come.

In their attempts to convert, Róza and her family members walked a markedly different path than did Dani. Physical suffering and miraculous healing play a part in many conversion narratives, and this is not unique to the Roma. But Roma converts share a common experience of having a direct, intimate connection with the Lord and Jesus. When asked about their belief in God, they often mention their 'knowledge of God' (Rom: *me prinzhanaw le devles*). Therefore, prayer as a 'conversation' with God is not unusual among Roma converts. In Róza's story, she and her daughter had already had direct relations with God even before being converted. Divine signs and answers are often close at hand; one must only open his or her eyes and heart. Therefore, in Róza's narrative the moment of conversion itself does not mark a sudden and novel encounter with the supernatural. In Róza's case conversion came along with her having been healed. The difficulties of her post-conversion life had only just begun with her acceptance of God. The process of conversion burdens the convert, who must work through his or her new commitments. Among these commitments kinship seems to be the most important.

Neighbours and friends form another category of social contacts with whom the convert must deal in his or her new personhood. Converts are often faulted for being *selfish*. This has partly to do with the convert's awareness of being saved while others might be doomed. But converts are also seen as being selfish in more worldly ways: the convert, as part of the renegotiation of his or her life, may have to sever pre-existing social relations and abandon social networks that stretch outside the bounds of the faith community, or those that could potentially be seen as 'sinful'. Róza and other similarly isolated converts I met, however, were not thought of as selfish. The fact that I had gone so long without realizing Róza was a convert, though partially due to the fact that I was preoccupied with work I was conducting in a different part of the village, was also due to the fact that Róza did not conspicuously display her piety or have the physical appearance of a convert (i.e. adopting a dress code).

When Róza speaks about her incomplete baptism by the Holy Spirit, she is aware of her husband's scepticism (Hun: *ne csinálnál az eszed*) and her family's fear of her ecstatic displays. Róza imagines an ideal scenario of spiritual support: upon the first signs of the Holy Spirit appearing in the convert's behaviour, the family members would kneel down around him or her and pray for his/her baptism. She experienced the signs: trembling and against her will, her hands rose, a power like a strong wind or fire came down to her, and she began to speak loudly, but the family refused to support her. The

presence of their young children is strategically referred to by Róza's husband; small children should not be frightened. This preoccupation with the well being of children was also exhibited by Dani, who prayed in the forest so as to not disturb the children in his house. Roma find great pleasure in playing with their kids, and babies and children are sources of great joy, they also tend to believe that fright can cause serious illness, particularly for children.

Family values and the safety of babies are called upon once more, when Róza's daughter is threatened with divorce by her husband. At this moment, Róza takes responsibility for protecting her daughters' marriage, even risking violating one of the ethical tenets of Pentecostalism – that the faith should be spread as much as possible. In practice, Róza was able to maintain most of her life as a convert, remaining low-profile and doing little missionary work. She recognises the inherent tension between her religious and family life, and she fears that her family members will suffer for not converting. Her fear is expressed in the dualistic language of the Pentecostals: God will not leave the family alone, but Satan will also approach them, and as they are not converted, her family members are vulnerable to his attack.

It is worth noting that Róza's son-in-law (Rom: *zhamutro*) did not oppose his wife's conversion because of any deference to the values of another religion, but simply for pragmatic reasons: he would be unable to practice his job as a musician (which involves parties and drinking) being married to a pious, converted wife. Róza's brother-in-law (Rom: *kumnato*) relied on a bias towards male superiority when he prevented Róza's husband from being baptised.

The first preliminary conclusion that can be drawn from these cases is that conversion should not be viewed as a single event, and should not be attributed solely to a personal decision. It is analytically more useful to look at conversion as a process, which, though potentially triggered by an individual's choice, nonetheless sets in motion a succession of events that affect and are affected by the convert's position in local social networks and his or her pre-conversion values and commitments. Even in extreme cases in which the convert is cut off from his/her everyday world, it is still worth looking at the convert's shifting commitments and values. Therefore, prison conversions (as is the case of Dani) can be of special interest. A second conclusion is that studying conversion can be useful for understanding more than just the particular religious movement in question. Nonetheless, individual religions may be objects of study in their own right, and studying conversion could lead to a better understanding of religious phenomena. There is a further reaching consequence of social-anthropological approaches to conversion: For the ethnographer, individual conversion attempts offer a window into the social-cultural context surrounding the convert. The tensions and transformations experienced by converts reveal much about larger social systems.

REFUSAL: JOHN 3: 4-7 IN A ROMUNGRO SETTLEMENT

Accompanied by my host Misi, I paid a visit to the preacher (Dani) with whom I was by then familiar with. We found him outside his house with a group of several other converts (two males Jani and Zoli and several females) who were in a heated discussion with a non-converted Rom, Bandi, who had recently returned to the village from the city. Some non-converted Roma joined the circle and listened on with intrigue and curiosity.

As I later found out, Bandi was a rather educated person; his parents were from the village, but he had grown up in an orphanage and finished vocational education in the city. Occasionally he would visit his relatives in the village, and as they lived in the same neighbourhood as the preacher, Bandi dropped by for a chat that developed into a quite intellectual discussion with the converted families. The discussion attracted more people, and when we arrived the group was discussing the idea of being 'born again'. I recorded the scene with their permission. I think it is fair to say that the discussion was not considerably influenced by my presence and use of the camera.

The preacher assigned various passages from the Bible for Bandi to read, and together they would then interpret the passage. In some cases Bandi reluctantly accepted the scriptural interpretation offered by the converts, but often he claimed that the text was inconsistent and because of this refused to admit that the Scriptures could provide a basis for any normative framework. Bandi loudly declared that he had been "educated by the Communists", and so his knowledge was based on material existence. In some cases he was surprisingly well informed; he referred to the Dead Sea Scrolls when talking about the non-canonical texts of the Bible, and about DNA when the discussion came to the topic of reproduction.

On the issue of being born-again (as accounted for in John 3: 4-7)¹⁰, Bandi proved to be a rather tough opponent for the preacher: he refused to accept that Jesus had been thoroughly honest in his talk with Nicodemus who asked him a simple question: 'How can a man be born when he is old?'. In order to show how unfair Jesus had treated his interlocutor, Bandi recounted the following story. During the course of Bandi's narration Dani tried to interrupt several times, dismissing the whole story as having nothing to do with heavenly matters, but the audience remained rather puzzled by the situation, some of them refusing to believe that Bandi was totally wrong. Their growing sympathy for Bandi's challenge was based on the text's built-in ambivalence: Jesus' metaphorical answer to Nicodemus: 'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again.' Bandi was quick to point out that Jesus offers no direct answer to the question and that written texts often have more than one meaning. Bandi also argued that literate people can interpret scripture to suit their own tastes and agendas. As a result of the discussion the non-converted audience became increasingly sympathetic to Bandi's line of argumentation. Bandi's story went as follows:

BANDI: - *A great fortune-teller was living before the Second World War... what he said would come true, remember: before the war it came true! A man came to him and asked: "Look, my son is going to the war, is he going to live or not?" Look what he did! [Bandi takes a piece of wood and draws lines on the ground, to imitate how the fortune-teller writes.]*

BANDI: - *You all know Romanian, right?... [He fails to complete his writing because the stick breaks. He throws it away.] Dammit!...*

DANI: - *Look, take this! [Dani throws a sharp stone to Bandi's feet. Bandi takes the stone and continues to write on the soil.]*

BANDI: - *Look here! What does he reply? "NU; VA TRAI". [It is a pun, which can be interpreted as 'He will live' or 'He will not live']*

ZOLI: - *He will not... [He reads the signs.]*

BANDI: - *So: NU; VA TRAI. Keep it in mind! The boy goes to the war and he is killed. "Didn't you say to me, that he would live!?" He replies: "Me? What have I written to you? NU; va trai."*

BANDI: - *Whatever you might do he will get the upper hand!*

DANI: - *Fine, so what?*

BANDI: - *Wait, wait, wait... let me...*

JANI: - *Let him, let him...*

BANDI: - *So if he lives: "I said to you that he would live!" ...if he dies "I told you he is going to die! He will not live!" You know why this is? Because of this: a point and a comma [;]. So look at what I am not able to understand...*

DANI: - *Just a moment...*

JANI: - *Let him, let him...*

ZOLI: - *Wait a moment...*

DANI: - *Do you know what this means?... Compared to the works of Jesus Christ? It is like heaven to earth... Exactly nothing! That is all you've said!*

BANDI: - *OK. So look, what I am unable to understand is: "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter..."*

DANI: - *Are you done?*

JANI: - *Let him, let him... He should say when he is finished!*

BANDI: - *So this is what Jesus says: if one is not born out of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. This is 5... Let's start at 4. Nicodemus says the following... So this is what Nicodemus asks, and what I've just read is how Jesus replies. The question is: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" So that is what a countryman asked.*

DANI: - *Right...*

JANI: - *It is true! Right...*

BANDI: - *It is exactly like how the father asked: "Will my son survive?" And you reply "NU; VA TRAI". You put point and a comma. So you cheat me!*

DANI: - *But...*

In order to interpret this scene it is important to point out that even if some of the participants had received primary education, most were at least functionally illiterate. Therefore most would be unable to appreciate the subtleties of Romanian orthography such as the ambiguous use of the semicolon. They thus easily accepted that a semicolon could be turned into a tool of deception. On the other hand, this generalised scepticism can be seen as the protective strategy of those who feel powerless in the face of written documents. The credibility of the story is enhanced by its reference to fortune telling which can be practiced with success by using creative invention and manipulation of signs.¹¹

As soon as Bandi felt that he had gained the sympathy of his audience, he pushed his challenge further:

BANDI: - *But keep in mind, that I cannot understand this Part 5 at all. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The only one who is born of Spirit is Jesus, I am sorry.*

ZOLI: - *Praise him!*

JANI: - *That is why he says...*

BANDI: - *So he is the one! He is the only one.*

DANI: - *Right...*

BANDI: - *So we can't give examples that you or somebody else was born of the Spirit. He is the one, so he should not be considered here.*

DANI: -

BANDI: - *So now... "You must be born again." This is beyond my understanding, again... I am born again if... I swap my faith...*

DANI: - *Some light is coming...*

JANI: - *You see that you will...*

BANDI: - *But wait a second, man!*

DANI: - *Don't you see I am sitting here!*

JANI: - *Take it with more gentleness!*

BANDI: - *But, this is not what Nicodemus asked. He is asking if he, as an old man in flesh and bones, can enter his mother's womb again. This is what he asks! And he [Jesus] does not reply!*

These allegedly down-to-earth arguments and Bandi's refusal of the more subtle or metaphorical interpretations are backed by a moral claim on respecting the everyday rules of discussion. While Dani made several attempts to turn the discussion to more spiritual concerns, the debate slipped into a discussion of the problems related to being born in a biological sense. The conversation took on an even more frivolous twist, forcing Dani onto the defensive, so he changed the topic and opened the Bible to a different passage and handed it back to Bandi. "He does not need to look. He knows it by heart, because he has recited it so many times..." Dani's wife commented supportively.

SINCERITY, THE HEART AND OTHER TANGIBLE SIGNS

*Na dikh tu, na dikh tu ke hom kalo,
numa o Del, numa o Del prinzhanel munro jilo.¹²*

*(Do not look, do not look that I am black,
God alone, God alone knows my heart.)*

These two lines are taken from a Pentecostal song popular among Roma converts. The opposition it expresses between the outer appearance of the person, which is seen as *kalo* (black) by others, and his or her inner quality, which can only be recognised through the divine relationship, is a major distinction that builds the converted self. The statement that God knows (Rom: *prinzhanel*) the heart of the convert is seen as reciprocal, as the verb *prinzhandel* is used to express a more intimate acquaintance between two people as opposed to the more distant relation between a person and an object known from the 'outside' (Rom: *zhanel*). Therefore, once God recognises the heart of the convert, the convert also comes to know the personal God for him or herself. I often heard the same expression when I asked people if they 'knew' God. People rarely responded negatively to this, even among the non-converted Roma.

One can come to know God due to the passage of either fortuitous or inauspicious events, through divinely inspired dreams, or still through hearing voices. All of these paths to God are available for converts, but the main difference between converts and non-converts is that converts claim to have a more intimate connection with God, using their open hearts to communicate. Escaping from a difficult situation (as in the case of Dani), or being miraculously healed (like Róza) do not necessarily lead to conversion. If a 'covenant' with God had not been made by Dani, or if the Holy Spirit had not 'sealed' Róza, both would have continued with their pre-conversion lives. But as Róza and Dani fostered a special connection with God (as they account for in their narratives), both claim they started to become different people. However, this new personhood is not always easily validated in the social contexts of the converts.

Even if a special connection between converts and God is accepted by outsiders, a puzzle nonetheless persists: What can secret relationships with God, which are encapsulated in the hearts of converts, reveal to and validate for the outside world? The unconverted may either refuse to accept or not recognise these relationships as real. An outsider, even if he or she accepts the existence of God, may doubt the veracity of the convert's claimed connection to God. Converts have their own way of dealing with outsiders; they insist on the truth of their special relationship with God and express this connection in ritual forms. A convert can distinguish between those who 'think of themselves as being Christians' and 'real believers' based on the verifiable existence (or lack thereof) of a strong relationship with God.

The construction of this relationship is contingent upon a definition of the inner self engendered by an opposition between outside and inside. The oft repeated phrase "God does not look at the face of a person, but at his heart." (Rou: *Dumnezeu nu se uita la fata omului se uita la inima*) is a clear example of this opposition. This opposition places the heart at the centre of the inner self. It is important that the heart be 'open' because the only path to self-transformation is through inviting and accepting Jesus into one's heart. The main cause of failed conversions is a refusal on the part of the

would-be convert to accept the word of God into his or her heart. (Rou: *Nu primesti cuvintele lui Dumnezeu la inima.*)

Once the centre of the self is established and opened to the influence of God, changes become observable in the life of the convert. Ideally, the main consequence is an inner-driven unity of the self and behaviour that can be recognised in the everyday practices of the convert. Adopting a term utilised by Keane (2002), I refer to this unity of self and behaviour as *sincerity*. There is no exact equivalent for this term in the everyday speech of Roma converts, but I nonetheless hope to show that these two aspects are intertwined in the behaviour of converts. The closest term Roma use is *patjivalo* ('honest'), which refers to reliability in social interactions. *Patjivalo* is opposed to *ravaszi* ('cunning', a loan word from Hungarian), which describes people who hide their true intentions. The ideal of converted selfhood requires honesty and complete transparency. Keane points out that the ideal of sincerity assumes a clear distinction between words and thoughts; presupposes a hierarchical relation between inner self and speech; and seeks the authority of words as accurate reflections of inner states. Moreover the ideal of sincerity demands an effort from the speaker to match his/her words to his/her inner states. Therefore sincerity connects ideas about language to moral questions (Keane 2002: 75). When the sincerity of words uttered by a convert is contested by non-converts, as often happens, the morality of the convert is called into question.

While I was recording conversion narratives in the village, my host's daughter-in-law, who was in her early twenties and whose parents had converted to Pentecostalism when she was a teenager, warned me against accepting these narratives as "true". "Converts lie a lot!" (Rom: *O pokaiti but xoxavel!*) – she told me. Her view was shared by others who expressed their reservations not only behind the backs of converts, but also directly to some of them. One middle-aged male convert who was trying to publicly recount his conversion narrative was interrupted and ridiculed by some youngsters. The notion of sincerity is also useful for describing and explaining why non-verbal emotional expressions are so important for Pentecostals inside their communities. These observations point to the variable success of self-transformation attempts, as successful conversions are largely dependent upon the convert being socially accepted and his or her choice being reinforced by forces that are beyond his or her control.

Verbal utterances must be accepted as valid by the audience in order to attain their performative force (see also the earlier discussion of John 3:4-7). Therefore, the importance of the assembly and ritual gatherings in providing a sympathetic audience in the process of self-transformation cannot be overestimated, though there are accounts of the process being initiated outside of a ritual setting. Such was the case with Dani. After being beaten, Dani knelt in front of the guard who mocked Dani for what the guard believed to be Dani's excessively conspicuous pious display of religiosity in front of the other prisoners. But because Dani persevered in his prayers day-in and day-out, crying and asking God to help him escape, the same officer who had formerly mocked him had a change of heart and helped Dani file an appeal some days later. Dani attributed the change in the guard's attitude to the fact that "God put an intention in his mind and in his heart" to help him. Dani mentioned this event as one of the catalysts of his conversion, which happened after he was released. In this story the perseverance and sincerity of the prisoner changed his fate. The way Dani interprets the change in the

guard's attitude illustrates that even a cruel jailer is able to experience the beneficial effect of God in his heart and change his attitude for the better.

Though prayers uttered by a kneeling, crying man provoked the prison-guard to beat a prisoner, this overtly emotional form of worship and dedication tends to be the norm in Pentecostal assemblies. During services emotional individual prayers are encouraged during long prayer sessions that are alternated with singing, individual testimonies, and preaching. Church services provide an ideal setting for developing and practicing connections with the divine in the presence of fellow converts. The uttered prayers are improvised; the emphasis is on affective expression and immediate communication with the Holy Father and Jesus. These occasions also provide a setting in which congregants speak in tongues, a practice considered to signal that the speaker is being overcome by the Holy Spirit and is in immediate communication with God. Such an atmosphere can impress even a non-believer. Nico, an elder Roma described to me her first experience at a Pentecostal service, which she attended with her adult daughter. During the collective prayer the two exchanged sceptical looks and suppressed smiles. On the way home they joked about the people who had been crying during the prayer. As they continued attending subsequent services they too started to cry during the prayer sessions. "First I thought they were crazy (Rom: *dinjile*), but then we started to cry also."

'Opening one's heart' is not necessarily an intentional act; it can spontaneously occur during the ritual beyond the control or will of the affected individual. The further step of 'filling one's heart' with God (that is, making a commitment) requires more conscious activity and social control. A ritual in which the convert raises his or her hands, goes to the front of the congregation, and verbalises some variant of a prayer marks the initiation of this process. Following this commitment the active contribution of the assembly is of paramount importance. Most assemblies in the city have special structures for the incorporation and education of future members. So-called 'groups for growth' (Rou: *grupuri de crestere*) are small study groups that gather at the house of a member for this purpose, though hardly any of the Roma converts I met had been incorporated into their congregations through such structures. My informants usually participated in less systematic and usually informal gatherings in village homes, or went through a short preparatory course in a church before their baptism. Baptism may happen as soon as the course has been completed, and people drop out of the church rather frequently. When discussing his experience with Roma converts, a Romanian Pentecostal pastor in the city expressed his view that Roma converts may more easily accept Jesus, but they are not consistent enough in repenting. He gave the example of a young Roma who cried loudly in the assembly, "Oh, how nice it is along with you, my Lord!" (Rou: *Oh, ce mișto e cu tine Doamne!*),¹³ but the pastor found the man's commitment superficial.

There is one aspect of assembly life where the sincerity of church members is continuously tested. Pentecostal churches rely heavily on contributions from members, who are expected to regularly tithe (Rou: *zeciuială*). Nevertheless, as most Roma live of irregular (and often very low) incomes, the pastor and other members cannot directly determine the amount of money that each member should be expected to contribute. If a church member does not pay his or her tithe for some time, his or her survival can be seen as proof of insincerity in the domain of the material world, because the member

is thought to be hiding his or her income and failing to financially support the church. Therefore, the financial obligations of church members constitute a recurring sermon topic. The pastor of the Roma church in the city spent a considerable amount of his sermons reminding congregants that their donations would be multiplied and returned to them by God.

Converts find support and encouragement inside the assembly, but sometimes also find themselves to be the target of suspicious looks in their broader community. In the village, non-converted Roma and the Hungarian majority consider the ascetic rules of the Pentecostals as very foreign. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of male converts who were once known as drinkers. In a community where drinking is a common form of male sociability those who quit drinking rupture connections with their peer-groups. This is compensated for by the alternative community with which converts are connected through the process of conversion, though converts may still be tempted to join their former drinking friends for drinks.¹⁴ Discussing alcohol consumption with two converted Roma in the village, I was told that it would be wrong for a converted person to drink even an alcohol-free beer. They explained that if one is a known convert and is seen by non-converts drinking beer it would encourage the non-converted to continue drinking and would thus damage the image of the Pentecostals in the larger community.

In this way converts exclude themselves from many of the settings of male sociability. On Sundays one can also see these same people dressed in elegant suits, carrying Bibles or hymnals, and even donning eye-glasses that they do not usually wear on weekdays. Peace greetings (Rou: *Pace!*) are exchanged and converts shake hands. Even when the gathering is at a local home there is a visible attempt to celebrate the day. When there is a bigger event such as a visit by a guest pastor, a group of converts from the city or from neighbouring villages may gather for bigger a service in the local Baptist prayer house on the main square of the village. Pentecostals and the few Baptists (also local Roma) celebrate such occasions together.

Dani is married to a Roma from another village and his wife usually joins the Pentecostals in their services. She was baptised along with a young Roma by a Baptist pastor from the city at a missionary event in her village. The priest had brought a large plastic container and had filled it with water. The converts were submerged in water, much to the astonishment of the onlookers, amongst which was the local orthodox priest. The services of a photographer were also called upon to immortalise the event for the newly baptised members. The photograph that Dani's wife displays in their house is tangible evidence of her conversion. She showed me the picture, proudly proclaiming that the entire event had been organised solely for their baptism, and this in order to show a 'real baptism' to the villagers.

THE PHRALA (BROTHERS): A NEW FORM OF SPIRITUAL KINSHIP

The refrain of the aforementioned Pentecostal song is the following:

Oh che shukar, oh che shukar o Isus si amaro phral,
Oh che shukar, oh che shukar vas amenge vo muleas!

(Oh, how wonderful [it is]; oh how wonderful, Jesus is our brother,
Oh, how wonderful [it is]; oh how wonderful, He died for us!)

The idea of brotherhood expressed in these lines is composed of several elements. On the one hand, fraternity with Jesus is a privilege for those who join assemblies. On the other, the option of joining an assembly is open to the wider community. I argue, therefore, that this ideal of spiritual kinship is simultaneously inclusive and yet elitist. The all-encompassing element of this brotherhood can be demonstrated through its trans-local character. 'Brothers' are everywhere in Romania and abroad, and this spiritual kinship network can be further extended through the incorporation and conversion of 'outsiders' found in the immediate social surroundings of the congregants.

The practice of brotherhood in Gánás is neither uprooted from nor totally defined by existing local and kinship ties. There is indeed a significant overlap between the kinship based on pre-conversion social ties and the broader connections created through the conversion. These broader connections also use kinship terms (brother, sister, etc.) to denote the social ties. It is more accurate to describe the practice of brotherhood as a public expression of belonging. Thus, the boundaries of the local assembly are salient, and converts who do not regularly attend the assembly or who are reluctant to express and practice the ethic of their religion are eventually excluded.

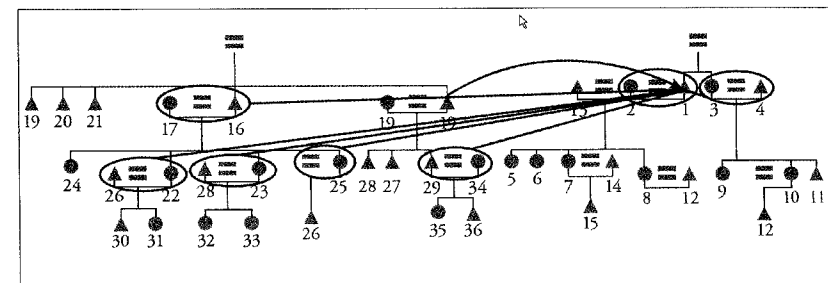


Figure 1: Distribution of aid shown on a kinship diagram

Figure 1 is based on my observation of a situation in which aid was distributed among the converted *brothers*. A pastor (18), who lived in another village but who had familial connections with Gánás (e.g. 16) sent word to Dani (1), that Dani was to be entrusted with managing the distribution of clothing donations from abroad. The pastor did not drive all the way into the village, so Dani waited for the aid truck by the side of the main road. From there, Dani hired a local cart to carry the cargo to the village. There were 17 large bags filled with clothes. Dani loaded the cargo on the cart and brought it to the Roma neighbourhood in which he lived. The clothing was distributed according to kinship lines as shown in figure 1. Dani kept for himself and his brother-in-law 12 bags (6 each), and distributed the remaining five to the most active converts in the assembly, each receiving one bag. The clothing was further distributed, exchanged, or sold by the recipients among the local Roma.

In its ideal form, the brotherhood is both a voluntary association and an elite organisation, but these ideas must be contextualised in the broader local social structure. When considering stratification in the village, it becomes apparent that the transformation of the self and construction of the converted community offers an opportunity for

social mobility for people from lower status positions. This desire for mobility does not directly challenge existent ethnic and status divisions. Everyday practices and signs of conversion create a sense of belonging for the religious elite without relying on or opposing pre-existing local social structures. People who have otherwise been seen as marginal by the local majority acquire access to symbolic resources, which promise to change their position through recourse to resources external to local structures. The practice of brotherhood relies on existing local ties and reinforces the boundaries of the converted 'elite community'.

CONCLUSION

Although advocacy of inner-directed conversion is hardly a novelty for missionaries, and although 'the heart' is thought to be the centre of the self in other contexts as well,¹⁵ Pentecostalism diverges from most other forms of Protestantism in its emphasis on not only the transparent and inner-governed self, but also in its acceptance of a wide spectrum of emotional expressions as being spiritual. Unity of the self is grounded in emotional experiences, and these experiences can be validated as divinely inspired. I suggest that this aspect of Pentecostalism can be best understood with an enhanced concept of sincerity that incorporates and credits these experiences as authentic. An implication of Pentecostals' experience-centred orientation is that their potential target group is humanity as a whole. Converts insist that everyone is capable of opening their heart to emotional-spiritual experiences.

The concept of sincerity offers an answer to the question of why the universally oriented Pentecostal church has been most successful amongst socially segregated groups. The social life of a convert depends on communal recognition of the sincerity of the convert. Pentecostal Assemblies provide a space for expression of emotions and verbal utterances that are repudiated by outsiders. Boundary-maintenance of these groups is realised through a small number of ascetic elements present in Pentecostal ethics (i.e., non-smoking and zero tolerance for alcohol) and to a certain degree in tangible representations of religious elitism. Apparently these groups rely more on the micro-dynamics of the local societies in which they are embedded than they do on any form of centralised structure.

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NOTES

- ¹ This paper is based on a chapter of my PhD dissertation defended in July 2007 at the Institute for Ethnology, Martin Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg. The research was part of the 'Religion and Civil Society' project of the Post Socialist Eurasia Department at Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle. I owe thanks to Chris Hann and all the participants of the writing up seminar organised at the MPI for commenting on an earlier draft of this text.
- ² The people I am concerned with belong to the Romungro group also called "magyarcigány" meaning 'Hungarian Gypsies'. I carried out fieldwork in the city of Cluj and in a nearby village I refer to as Gánás. Most of the local Roma are trilingual: in addition to their native dialect of Romani they are proficient in Romanian and Hungarian. Throughout this study I refer to this group simply as 'Roma' following the in-group usage of the term. All personal names are pseudonyms.
- ³ For a discussion of conversion in the context of colonialism see Comaroff and Comaroff (1991).
- ⁴ The exchange between John Peel (Peel 1992) and the Comaroffs (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 42-53) exemplifies these tensions. See also the Terrence Ranger's (2001) review of Peel.
- ⁵ Patrick Williams' studies (1984; 1991) initiated anthropological interest in the conversion of Roma to Pentecostalism. In these seminal essays Williams introduces many of the ideas which were further developed and illustrated in ethnographical examples by others. On one hand he connects Pentecostal conversions to the processes of urbanisation, because many of the problems emerging through in this process are addressed and 'treated' by conversions. On the other hand, the community of the converted offers new social space and facilitate new forms of identifications which overarch the divisions between the different subgroups.
- ⁶ I cannot introduce here the history of the spread of Pentecostalism in Romania. For an overview see my discussion in Fosztó (2006).
- ⁷ The everyday term Roma use for converted people, 'o pocaiti', is derived from this Romanian word. They sometimes also use a derivative from the Hungarian term (hívő); 'o hívövi'. Actual members of these churches most often refer to themselves simply as Christians (Rou: *crestin*). I use the following code for the different languages Rou – for Romanian, Rom – for Romani, and Hun – for Hungarian.
- ⁸ The baptism of the Holy Spirit is considered to be the sign of the true conversion in Pentecostalism. It is often accompanied by extraordinary experiences and receiving the 'gifts of the Spirit' (e.g. glossolalia).
- ⁹ The 'seal' is the sign of being chosen for salvation.
- ¹⁰ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' (New International Version)
- ¹¹ Apart from one attempt by a Roma in the initial period of my fieldwork, nobody tried to tell my fortune, nor did I see anybody practicing fortune telling with the villagers.
- ¹² This song circulates in a wider context than the local Roma group or the assembly in the city with which I am most familiar. The dialect found in the song is different from

local Romani. Romungre call the heart '*vodji*' not '*jilo*' – they readily point out that the song comes from other Roma assemblies.

¹³ 'Mişto' [Rom: mishto 'good'] is a loan word from Romani in Romanian meaning 'good' or 'nice'. It is used in informal contexts and often has an ironic connotation (Leschber 1995: 167).

¹⁴ Michael Kearney (2004) describes a similar problem in the case of a peasant community in Mexico.

¹⁵ Based on archival research, John Peel (2000:250-5) describes 19th century evangelicalism as "a religion of the heart".