

Slavery, Cultural Trauma, and Romani Identity Between Reconciliation with the Past and Internal Coloniality

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Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

This article develops and tests a methodological approach for studying the memory of Romani slavery that transcends oral history and archival research sources, treating local mnemonics – such as oikonyms, spatial morphology, and institutionalised sources – as carriers of memory. By grounding and applying this methodology to the case of Dezrobiți village, I show how the cultural trauma of slavery reveals itself even where silence, denial, or fragmentation obscure direct narratives, collective memory, and symbols.

Keywords

- Collective memory
- Cultural trauma
- Mnemonics
- Roma identity
- Slavery

Introduction

In the interwar period, disputes over the right of Roma to commemorate slavery became strikingly evident. In 1934, *Ilustrațiunea Română*, a monthly magazine, published an article entitled “80 Ani Dela Desrobirea Țigănilor” (80 years since the liberation of the Gypsies), which ironised and dismissed Romani initiatives to commemorate their emancipation (Rex 1934). In the same year, in turn, *Glasul Romilor* (*The voice of Roma*), a Roma-led newspaper, proclaimed the need for historical recognition and social change: “In 1854, the great statesmen of the time thought about improving the fate of Roma.... Since then, however, no one has thought about our fate” (Lenghescu-Cley 1934). These contrasting discourses reveal how Romanian elites marginalised the memory and remembrance of slavery while Romani intellectuals and activists sought to articulate it.

Furthermore, while a Romani elite advocated for recovering historical memory, segments of the Romanian intellectual elite started to develop and promote eugenic and racial theories that classified Roma as “dysgenic” and inferior. This culminated in the deportation of more than 25,000 Roma to Transnistria during the Holocaust, nearly half of whom perished (Turda and Furtună 2022). During communism, Romani intellectuals, as sociologist Nicolae Gheorghe, unsuccessfully advocated for the recognition of Roma as a “cohabiting nationality” (Achim 2010). Gheorghe nonetheless laid the foundations for the post-communist Romani civic movement, emphasising the importance of slavery in shaping identity. At a global level, Ian Hancock’s book, *The Pariah Syndrome* (1987), brought attention to Romani enslavement, urging Roma themselves to reclaim and tell their history.

Following the official recognition of Roma in Romania as an ethnic minority in 1990, the recovery of slavery’s memory intensified. Vasile Ionescu published landmark volumes on the history of enslavement (2000; 2001), while activists and researchers such as Nicolae Gheorghe and Delia Grigore linked historical memory to identity politics. These efforts translated into memory policies: the creation of the National Centre for Roma Culture (2003), the adoption of February 20 as the official commemoration day (2011), and the adoption of a law establishing a National Museum of Roma History and Culture (2023).

Building on these efforts, this article develops and tests a methodology to analyse the collective memory of Romani slavery by focusing on local mnemonics – such as oikonyms, spatial arrangements, and sites of memory – and their role in bearing memory and shaping ethnic identity through the lens of cultural trauma. The case study of Dezrobiți village in Vâlcea County, rooted in the former dwellings of enslaved Roma from Dintr-un Lemn Monastery, provides an empirical setting to explore these issues. The village name itself – *Dezrobiți* (the Freed) – illustrates how memory is inscribed in space, at once symbolising emancipation and reinforcing hierarchies of power.

Using this case study, the article examines how remembrance of slavery remains embedded in local history and community identity. It highlights the ambivalent role of mnemonics: on one hand, facilitating reconciliation with a traumatic past; on the other, reproducing legacies of internal coloniality – inequities and marginalisation. The broader objective is twofold: to contribute a methodological framework for studying cultural trauma through local memory practices and to demonstrate how the legacies of slavery

continue to shape Romani identity, both in tension with and in resistance to dominant national narratives. By situating this analysis within memory studies, cultural trauma theory, and Critical Romani Studies, the article underscores that the memory of slavery is not a static remnant of the past but an active, contested force in the present, shaping both identity and politics.

1. A Methodological Approach for the Study of the Memory of Romani Enslavement

When I worked alongside Delia Grigore in the 2000s, I first heard her mention that there is a locality called “Dezrobiți” (“the Freed”) in Romania. That remark stayed with me, and I often wondered whether the memory of slavery might still survive there, while in my own family and in most Romani families in Romania it had largely disappeared.

The first concrete step toward developing the methodology presented in this article was a 2017 research fellowship with the Community Development Agency “Împreună,” where Delia Grigore was assigned as my supervisor. In this role, she was among the first to encounter and engage with my intention to study the collective memory of Romani enslavement. I understood how important my approach to the study of the collective memory of Romani slavery was when this was applied in the MEMOROBIA project in 2022–2025.^[1]

Frances Amelia Yates (1899–1981), a historian of the Renaissance, published in 1966 her influential book *The Art of Memory*, exploring the role of memory before the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press (1455). The title was inspired by the ancient Greek poet Simonides, who developed a mnemonic technique based on associating each place in a given space with an idea, image, phrase, or word. According to legend, while reciting a poem at a nobleman’s banquet, Simonides was called outside by two young men. In his absence, the roof collapsed, killing and disfiguring all the guests inside. By recalling where each person had been seated, Simonides enabled their families to identify the bodies. Yates demonstrated how such mnemonic practices, developed in Antiquity and refined in the Renaissance, shaped European intellectual culture and memory. Her work revealed that memory was not merely a tool for learning but a fundamental cultural and intellectual practice influencing art, philosophy, religion, and science.

Starting from this framework, I began to ask what connections exist among people, the places they occupy, and the names given to them. Could there also be an “art of memory” in the spatial and symbolic positions of Roma and Romanians – figuratively at the same table? Viewed in this light, oikonyms (oikonims) become more than names: they are carriers of memory.

I rely on Maurice Halbwachs’s distinction between historical and collective memory, and his emphasis on the relation between social groups and spatial environments, to develop and test a methodology that

¹ See more detail about the project here: <https://mf.no/en/memorobia>.

reads oikonyms, monasteries, and demographic continuities as mnemonic markers. For Halbwachs, historical memory refers to the reconstruction of the past through external, written, or institutionalised sources – such as the name of the locality, the official website of the commune, the spatial morphology, or the archives – whereas collective memory is a living and dynamic process, embedded with meaning in the social frameworks and transmitted within groups (Halbwachs 2007, 95–140).

Building on and also moving beyond Halbwachs's concept of spatial frameworks of memory, this article shifts attention from how space supports collective memory to how it reveals the absence or distortion of memory within histories. In the case of Romani slavery, archival documentation is not lacking, yet these materials are rarely translated into living, community-based remembrance. The discontinuity lies not in the evidence but in its cultural transmission.

By reading oikonyms, land ownership patterns, and the proximity between former princely palaces, boyars' mansions or monasteries, and present Romani settlements as mnemonic structures, I propose and test a methodology for identifying where memory has been displaced from consciousness into the morphology of space and the endurance of everyday social relations.

The methodology rests on three interrelated dimensions:

- a. Chronological – examining Romani neighborhoods and villages through the stages of their residential sedentarisation;
- b. Spatial – analysing localities situated near monasteries, boyar estates, and princely courts that owned enslaved Roma.
- c. Mnemonic – interpreting oikonims, parish names, land allocations, and institutional records as elements that preserve memory of enslavement.

To operationalise this framework, I conducted a case study in Dezrobiți, Vâlcea County, a village whose name itself (“the Freed”) marks slavery and emancipation. Data collection combined structured individual and group interviews, and informal conversations with people currently working for the monastery; three waves of direct observation; and the analysis of archival and documentary sources, including the monastery's own monograph. Content analysis of the interviews, social documents, and my own field notes enabled me to identify the main categories of representation concerning the memory of slavery and to explore how these categories inform collective identity and cultural trauma in the present.

2. ‘Țigănia’ as a Place of Memory of Enslavement and Cultural Trauma

I approach mnemonics primarily through oikonyms. Place names are not merely labels but carriers of memory that point to the continuity of communities through history. This is particularly relevant for Romani communities, where the traces of slavery have often been silenced or erased from official history but remain embedded in local spaces and oral traditions.

The term “*țigănie*” illustrates this dynamic. In Romanian folk usage, “*țigănie*” refers to a neighbourhood where Romani people live. It derives from the exonym “*țigan*”, which was first imposed in the Byzantine Empire. Most “*țigăanii*”, especially in rural areas, originated in dwellings attached to the estates of boyars, monasteries, or princely courts, where Roma were enslaved. As such, they represent a direct link to the institutions of enslavement. To be understood as a place of memory of slavery, a “*țigănie*” must maintain this link to its origins, preserving spatial and temporal continuity with the structures of domination that produced it.

Here, Maurice Halbwachs provides a useful framework. He argues that collective memory is anchored in spatial morphology: “When a human group lives for a long time in an environment adapted to its habits, not only are its movements regulated according to the succession of material images that represent external objects, but its thoughts are too” (Halbwachs 2007, 200). In other words, memory is not abstract, but organised spatially, creating a symbolic map in which each place occupies a position within a hierarchy dictated by the past. When the morphology of space changes, the memory hierarchy is disrupted. From this perspective, “*țigănia*” is not only a social or ethnic label but also a mnemonic landscape. Through continuity of settlement, it preserves the memory of slavery, even when explicit narratives are absent, and transmits it across generations. This is why memory often survives more in spatial arrangements and community practices than in words – a form of “memory in bodies”, inscribed through descent.

The case of Dezrobiți village in Vâlcea County is a prime example of this process. The proximity of the Romani community to Dintr-un Lemn Monastery in its spatial morphology reflects the historical relationship of enslavement. Beyond morphology, public markers such as the village’s name itself reinforce the mnemonic significance of slavery. These elements are discussed further in the following section and demonstrate how slavery is inscribed in both space and collective consciousness.

At the same time, however, “*țigănia*” must also be understood as a site of cultural trauma. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines this as a social process whereby members of a group interpret a horrific event as leaving an indelible mark on their collective consciousness and fundamentally shaping their future identity (Alexander 2004, 11). In Dezrobiți, the memory of slavery and the meanings attached to it can be analysed through this lens, as collective interpretations that shape identity across generations, rather than static recollections.

Ron Eyerman, writing on slavery and the formation of African-American identity, emphasises the link between trauma, collective identity, and the social construction of memory (2004, 60). Although his framework was developed in a different context, it provides a useful comparative model: slavery as a foundational trauma that shapes identity even when remembered indirectly.

For Romani communities, however, the trajectory is more fragmented. Many Romani people have lost explicit memory of slavery due to assimilation, urbanisation, and political silences. A term that can be put in relation to “*țigănie*” is “*mahala*”. Derived from Turkish, the word often was used to name Romani neighbourhoods, as is the case of Roma in Tismana, where the term, due to its sense of naming more a social category of people rather than an ethnic one: “*mahalagiu*” = a person who lives in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of a city; through extension the term was invested with the sense of “with vulgar, coarse

tendencies, who argue and gossip” (Dexonline 2004–2025). Compared with “*țigănie*”, the term “*mahala*” functions as a softened designation, one that conceals Roma’s ethnic identity beneath a neutral, spatial label. It reflects a tacit agreement – shared by both Roma and non-Roma – that allows the community to be referred to simply as “the people from the Mahala,” avoiding the stigma historically attached to the word “*țigan*.” (Furtună 2022, 168–196).

Yet the continuity of Romani settlement carries within it a quiet, enduring memory. Even when the villages were moved or reshaped, Roma remained bound to these places through the lives of their ancestors. They are the children and grandchildren of those once enslaved, and their presence itself becomes a form of remembrance. Even when words and stories have been lost, the memory of slavery endures – unspoken but alive in gestures, landscapes, and the very fact of their remaining (Rice and Kardux 2012, 245–272). Thus, “*țigănia*” operate on two levels: as a mnemonic space tied to the spatial legacy of slavery, and as a site of cultural trauma where that legacy continues to shape collective identity. It represents both continuity and rupture, and both survival and stigma – simultaneously preserving memory and reproducing the hierarchies born of enslavement.

3. The Mnemonic Ensemble That Preserved the Memory of Romani Enslavement and the Structure of Power Relations

Dezrobiți (the Freed) – The power of a name

Dictionaries from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are crucial for this research, as they show that several villages and hamlets across Romania bore the name “Desrobiți” and were populated largely by former enslaved Roma (Alessandrescu 1893, 126, 349, 362, 366; Gheorghiu 1895, 233; Racoviță 1895, 260, 370, 567). For example, the old *Geographical Dictionary of Vâlcea County* presents two entries for the oikonym “Desrobiți”: 1. “Desrobiți, part of the village of Romani, Horezu plain”; 2. “Desrobiți, village, part of the rural commune of Monastireni, Oltu-de-Sus. It has a population of 462 inhabitants (201 men, 261 women), and a school population of 46 children” (Alessandrescu 1893, 124).

Vâlcea’s village of Dezrobiți was originally named *Mănăstireni* (“Those who belong to the monastery”), which directly indicated Roma’s status as property of Dintr-un Lemn Monastery. After the Agrarian Reform of 1864, initiated by Alexandru Ioan Cuza, the name was changed to *Dezrobiți* [“Disenslaved” or “Freed”]. The new oikonym symbolised the transition from enslavement to emancipation, intended both to remind Romanian society of its past and to signal the lifting of stigma from the descendants of enslaved Roma. Romanian abolitionists of 1848 had played a major role in this process, describing slavery as a “shame” upon the nation, to be erased through emancipation (Kogălniceanu 1908, 46).

Other localities that received the name “Dezrobiți” later abandoned it, but the Vâlcea village preserved its use. The reason lies in the reform itself: many former slaves were granted half a hectare of land,

integrating them into the peasant class (*clăcași*) and bringing them closer to the social status of Romanian peasants. In practice, however, only part of the Roma benefited. Many were excluded from the land reform, remaining without property or secure livelihoods.

In the 1860s, Dezrobiți served as a symbolic monument to emancipation for the Romanian state. For Roma themselves, however, it evoked mixed feelings: the promise of freedom alongside the memory of slavery.

Ana Lucia Araujo observed in the context of southern Benin that commemorations of slavery can be perceived as an external imposition, recalling a past that many descendants would prefer to forget (Araujo 2010, 18). This tension persists today. The official website of Francești Commune, which administers Dezrobiți, states:

The village of Dezrobiți was first documented in 1634 as a village of Gypsy slaves who worked the lands of the Dintr-un Lemn Monastery. From 1864, the name Dezrobiți was adopted instead of Mănăstireni (Francești City Hall 2024).

By reproducing this narrative, the commune simultaneously acknowledges slavery and reinscribes the village's identity through it. However, the mnemonic ensemble extends beyond names and archives. Today, 90 per cent of Dezrobiți's inhabitants are Roma, most of whom are direct descendants of those enslaved by the monastery.

The community itself embodies continuity with slavery, preserving memory through descent and settlement. The Romani population is not only the subject of memory but also an integral mnemonic element; their presence in the village serves as a living reminder of the historical structures that shaped the lives of their ancestors.

Thus, the name Dezrobiți functions as an invitation to reconcile with history, but also as a sign of the ongoing reproduction of power relations. It is a symbol of emancipation and a marker of past domination, preserving the ambiguity of freedom won under unequal conditions.

Dintr-un Lemn Monastery – An eternal open gate between past and present

From the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, monasteries were central institutions of economic, cultural, and political power in Wallachia and Moldavia. Rulers demonstrated their piety by founding monasteries and endowing them with vast tracts of land, mills, vineyards, and, crucially, enslaved Roma. These donations meant that monasteries were among the largest slaveholders in Romanian history.

Like other villages formed near monasteries, Dezrobiți has the monastery as its monumental point of reference, continuously recalling enslavement. The collective memory of slavery here is inextricably linked to the presence of the Dintr-un Lemn Monastery. Even after the secularisation of monastic wealth in 1864, the monastery's religious life remained uninterrupted, unlike that of many others. As Mother

Abbesses Emanuela Oprea and Tecla Fuiogă observed, this continuity was considered miraculous (Oprea and Fuiogă 2014, 13). The monastery's monograph confirms this connection, with archival documents concerning enslaved Roma appearing alongside inventories of material heritage in its annexes (Fuiogă and Barac 2009, 176–207). Recognition of slavery thus comes from both secular sources (the commune website) and clerical authorities.

Today, the relationship between the monastery and the Romani community is more than just historical. Some villagers still work as day-labourers for the monastery, which reinforces the sense of continuity between the past and the present. For them, the monastery remains part of their collective identity: once their owner, now their employer, it represents both exploitation and belonging. This ambiguous bond “humanises” them, as some community members have expressed, setting them apart from Roma who are considered outsiders (for example, Romani-speaking or nomadic groups).

The Archdiocese of Râmnic further preserves this link by continuing to use the old parish name, Mănăstireni, even though the village has officially been called Dezrobiți for 160 years. On its website, the Archdiocese of Râmnic describes the parish church of Saint Paraschiva as being located “very close to the Dintr-un Lemn Monastery in the middle of Dezrobiți village” (Archdiocese of Râmnic 2024). By sustaining the old oikonym, the Church reinforces the memory of the connection between the monastery and enslaved Roma, thereby embedding slavery in the region's symbolic and spiritual geography.

4. The Local Collective Memory of Enslavement and its Reflection in the Ethnic Identity of the Freed

In this section, I examine how local mnemonics of slavery are reflected in the collective memory of Dezrobiți's inhabitants. My aim is to trace the relationship between these signs – as continuous forms of communication between past and present – and the identity of the villagers. At the same time, I question the position of the *dezrobiți* (the freed) in relation to the values and self-representations associated with modern Romani ethnic identity.

‘The Freed’ as poor – Rejecting Romani identity and constructing an identity of poverty

A feature of the collective memory of Dezrobiți is that poverty, rather than ethnicity, has become the dominant marker of identity. Roma in Dezrobiți, as well as those in other communities such as Tismana, tend to identify as “disadvantaged people”. This designation emphasises social condition while excluding ethnicity, reflecting a distancing from the Roma label and a reconfiguration of identity through socio-economic vulnerability, a policy concept developed by state institutions.

This form of identity construction is reflected in public representations of the village. For example, a local newspaper article from 22 December 2016 entitled “The village of Dezrobiți in Vâlcea is one of the poorest in the country” describes Santa Claus's arrival at the local school:

There are 60 pupils altogether. None of them has dropped out of school, even though their parents struggle to make ends meet. Recently, the children have started receiving a hot meal every day because the school has joined a government programme through which the local authorities receive funding for very poor communities. However, before eating, the little ones wash their hands and say a prayer. Of course, Santa could not resist such well-behaved children.

What is striking here is the complete absence of any reference to the children's Romani identity. Poverty becomes the defining feature of the village, while ethnicity remains unspoken.

This narrative also emerged in my field research. A Romani representative from Francești City Hall, himself a member of the Rudari community, described the reluctance of Dezrobiți's school mediator to facilitate interviews: "He says he is not a G**y, that his people are not... that he was not put in charge of G**ies, but of disadvantaged people." This statement reflects a broader pattern: identity framed through social exclusion rather than ethnicity. Poverty becomes a transgenerational attribute, linking present conditions to an imagined past. As one elderly woman (73 years old, Dezrobiți) explained when asked about the meaning of the village name: "Why is this village called Dezrobiți? Because the people were poor here, mother, the people here are poor!"

Here, the etymology of Dezrobiți, rooted in emancipation from slavery, is reinterpreted in terms of persistent poverty rather than historical slavery and freedom. Poverty replaces ethnicity as the dominant narrative, reframing the legacy of slavery not as shared ethnic trauma but as continuous socio-economic deprivation.

This phenomenon becomes clearer when viewed within the wider commune of Francești. While most of those who declared themselves as Roma in official statistics were not from Dezrobiți, they were from the Rudari community. However, the Rudari have a long-standing tradition of distancing themselves from Roma identity, instead cultivating the idea of descent from the ancient Dacians (Calotă). In contrast, the inhabitants of Dezrobiți – descendants of enslaved Roma – often avoid the Roma label altogether, preferring the more neutral category of "disadvantaged people".

This rejection of Romani identity has significant consequences. As sociologist Iulius Rostaș (2012, 199–230; 2020, 1–46) argues, the failure of many social policies directed at Romani communities lies precisely in their lack of ethnic relevance. When communities internalise categories such as "poor" rather than claiming Romani identity, they reinforce their own exclusion. In Dezrobiți, this tendency reflects both stigma and survival: distancing oneself from Romani identity avoids external discrimination but simultaneously erases the ethnic dimension of slavery's legacy.

The case of Dezrobiți therefore illustrates how the local collective memory of enslavement is filtered through present-day poverty. Rather than emphasising Romani identity as a framework for remembering slavery, the villagers reinterpret their past through a narrative of disadvantage. Poverty becomes both an explanation and an identity, connecting the present marginalised state with that of their ancestors. In this sense, the cultural trauma of slavery is refracted less through ethnic belonging than through social exclusion, producing what might be termed an "identity of poverty".

Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza as liberator from the shame of being țigan: Land ownership as a symbol of local belonging

For the formerly enslaved Roma of the Dintr-un Lemn monastery, the 1864 Agrarian Reform represented much more than the redistribution of land. Receiving half a hectare was seen as an entry into the social world of the village and a symbol of dignity, pride, and local identity. One man, aged over 70, explained: “My mother had it from her father. From his parents. He gave her the dowry, and it was the dowry that made us; we ruled the land.” When asked if land ownership placed them on an equal footing with Romanians, he replied: “Yes, because we had land.” Another villager added, “Well, that’s why they get upset when you call them ‘Gypsies’, that’s why.”

Here, land is not only an economic resource, but also a symbolic marker of freedom and recognition – a means of escaping the stigma of being a țigan. This echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’s thoughts on the emancipation of African-Americans, in which he identified the formation of a Black peasantry as a vital part of social change. In both cases, it was not only the legal decree of emancipation that elevated the freed from the status of slaves to that of recognised villagers but also land ownership. Field, garden, and house became symbols of dignity, hard work, and pride – values embedded in the identity of the Romanian peasant.

Yet, in Romanian cultural discourse, the phrase “Gypsy peasant” (țaran țigan) has always seemed contradictory. The “Romanian peasant” embodies the dignity of village life, tied to the land and hard labour in the sun. In contrast, a popular stereotype of Roma portrays them as nomadic and detached from the land – lovers of freedom rather than farming. For this reason, they were long denied a peasant identity. However, the Agrarian Reform of 1864 challenged this stereotype. By granting land, the reform enabled former enslaved Roma to break free from their identity as *monăstireni* – property of Dintr-un Lemn Monastery – and become *dezrobiți* or the freed. This was not only a legal and material change but also a symbolic and moral emancipation that uprooted them from the subhuman status that had been imposed on them for centuries. Local memory confirms this interpretation.

For Dezrobiți’s elderly population today, the figure of the liberator is not Barbu Știrbey, the Wallachian ruler who signed the 1843 law emancipating monastery slaves, but Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza. For them, emancipation is not associated with the abstract concept of legal abolition but with the tangible gift of “a place for a house and a garden”. Cuza’s reform thus occupies a central place in their memory because it offered a tangible sign of belonging: land. As one villager put it, emancipation became a reality when they were given land “like the Romanians”.

Owning land meant sharing in the dignity of peasant life, joining the symbolic community of the village, and distancing oneself from the shame of slavery. For the inhabitants of Dezrobiți, Cuza is remembered not only as the liberator from slavery but also from the stigma of being a țigan. The land itself became a mnemonic bridge connecting the trauma of slavery with the pride of local belonging.

The monastery as ‘Good Mother’

In Dezrobiți’s collective imagination, the monastery is represented as a “good mother”, a benevolent figure who has ensured the survival of the poor across generations. This symbolic representation is not only local, but also appears in official religious discourse. On 19 February 2016, to mark 160 years since the abolition of Romani slavery, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church declared:

The emancipation, however, found the Roma slaves unprepared. Although they were legally freed from slavery, most Roma people remained near the monasteries where they had once been enslaved. They formed entire Roma villages in the immediate vicinity of these monasteries and former boyar mansions, and these villages still exist today. They helped the landowners with agricultural work in exchange for money or food, and over time some became the owners of the land on which they lived (Patriarch Daniel 2016).

What is notable about this statement is the positive connotation that the highest clerical authority gives to slavery. By portraying monasteries as protectors and Roma as “unprepared” for freedom, the Patriarch reimagines centuries of forced labour as a narrative of benevolent care.

This representation is tied to persistent socio-economic conditions. After abolition, most Roma remained poor. Even Cuza’s Agrarian Reform of 1864, which granted some families half-hectare plots, could not ensure subsistence. Poor agricultural development in the Francești region, both before and after communism, reinforced dependence on the monastery. During fieldwork, many interviewees emphasised that they did not condemn the monastery but instead expressed a willingness to forgive – a disposition shaped by their continued reliance on the occasional work provided by the monastery, even to this day.

Religion reinforces this image. Unlike in other Romani communities in Vâlcea County, where Pentecostal churches have gained ground, the villagers of Dezrobiți have remained overwhelmingly Orthodox. This affiliation strengthens their symbolic attachment to the monastery, which they see less as a former enslaver and more as part of their spiritual and communal identity. In interviews, villagers rarely used the language of slavery or freedom. Instead, they spoke of protection and subsistence. The monastery is remembered not as an oppressor but as a provider. This perspective reflects historical continuity: the land granted in 1864 was insufficient to make families economically independent, so labour relations with the monastery endured. This structural dependence thus transformed into a perceived relationship of care, sustaining the image of the monastery as a “good mother”.

However, this forgiving memory contrasts sharply with the lack of institutional accountability. The Romanian Orthodox Church has never apologised for exploiting enslaved Romani labour for nearly five centuries.

This silence is particularly notable when compared with the Catholic Church. During a visit to a Romani community in Blaj in 2019, Pope Francis stated:

I have, however, a weight on my heart. It is the weight of the discrimination, segregation, and mistreatment that your communities have suffered. History tells us that neither Christians nor Catholics were strangers to this great evil. For this, I would like to ask for your forgiveness... for the moments throughout history when we have discriminated against you, mistreated you or judged you incorrectly, viewing you with the gaze of Cain rather than Abel (Pope Francis 2019).

By comparing these two perspectives, we can see how memory politics can differ. In Romania, the monastery is still seen as a nurturing mother, even by the descendants of those who were once enslaved there. A forgiving memory, shaped by dependence and Orthodoxy, obscures responsibility while maintaining the Church's moral authority.

5. Ethnic Identity as Cultural Trauma

At first glance, one might be tempted to describe Dezrobiți as an assimilated Romani community. Its inhabitants no longer speak Romani, do not preserve traditions or customs associated with “traditional” Romani groups, and rarely identify as Roma in official contexts.

Such communities have long attracted the attention of ethnographers and sociologists. During and after the Second World War, however, scholars framed assimilation through a lens deeply marked by racial prejudice. The ethnographer Ion Chelcea, for example, described mixed marriages between Roma and Romanians as a “lifting from the race” (*ridicare din neam*), an expression that openly suggested the racial inferiority of Roma (Chelcea 1944, 89). Similarly, Sabin Manuilă and D. C. Georgescu, who were known for their racist writings, noted in their report on the 1930 census that many Roma avoided declaring their ethnic identity because being identified as ‘Gypsy’ was considered socially degrading (Chelcea 1944, 74; Turda and Furtună 2022; Turda 2024).

The reluctance to self-identify as Roma is therefore not a new phenomenon. It is a practice rooted in the stigma historically associated with slavery and perpetuated by scholars, particularly Romanian eugenicists, the state, and present-day prejudices of the majority population.

Communities such as Dezrobiți and Tismana are located in regions that are emblematic of traditional Romanian ethnographic culture and have been greatly influenced by the presence of monasteries. Not only were these monasteries religious centres; they were also guardians of Romanian cultural traditions, pilgrimage sites, and economic hubs. They preserved local Romanian folklore and communal bonds well into the communist era, when other regions were reshaped by urbanisation.

Within such environments, Romani communities were exposed to intense pressures of assimilation. As guardian of national faith and culture, the Orthodox Church left little space for alternative ethnic representation. Romani identity was erased or repressed and associated with negative stereotypes such as danger, laziness, and nomadism. As Elena Trancă Buzneri notes in her monograph on Tismana, a tacit agreement seemed to govern relations: “Romanians know in their hearts that we are Gypsies, and we know

in our hearts” (Buzneri 2011, 21). Like the unspoken silence surrounding a shameful family secret, this tacit understanding ensured that the trauma of slavery remained unspoken. Silence became a way of managing stigma: if one does not speak of it, it is as if it does not exist.

In such a power relationship, the meaning of the word “G***y” was defined by the dominant culture. As long as the Roma descendants of the Dezrobiți conformed – singing Romanian folklore, working as day-labourers for the monastery, and avoiding public claims to ethnic difference – the social order was maintained. To openly claim Romani ethnicity would have disrupted this order and broken tacit rules established over centuries.

The “dream” of the freed people was to become Romanians, equal members of the national community. Indeed, the Romani people of Dezrobiți have actively contributed to Romanian cultural life. Many were musicians, performing in ensembles in nearby towns. During the communist era, Dezrobiți became particularly renowned for its emblematic Romanian folk dance, Călușarii. Villagers still recall with pride that they performed this dance mainly themselves, rather than ethnic Romanians. Through music and dance, they preserved and promoted Romanian folk traditions, even when their Romani identity was being denied or suppressed.

Yet the stigma of slavery remained. The descendants of monastery slaves often insisted that their status made them superior to the nomadic Roma, who were seen as dangerous and untrustworthy. Locally, the loss of Romani language is not viewed as a loss but as a point of pride. Romani is associated with crime and violence; it is seen as foreign and undesirable. For Dezrobiți, learning Romani today would not mean reconnecting with their roots but falling into a “black hole”, since collective memory insists that they never knew the language. Thus, this stance illustrates how deeply internalised prejudice shapes identity: the rejection of Romani language and culture is framed as protection, when in fact it perpetuates self-hatred.

What characterises the inhabitants of Dezrobiți is a distinct kind of self-hatred: an identity built on the rejection of one’s own ethnic roots and shaped by centuries of racial subordination. Vasile Ionescu, one of the founders of the post-communist Romani cultural movement, asked: “First, why do we tell the *Gadje*, like a personal story, and yet we do not discuss the warping disaster of racism amongst ourselves as a collective story?” (Ionescu 2018, 135). This “warping disaster” is precisely what sustains the Dezrobiți identity: slavery as a trauma that cannot be spoken of directly, but effects of which remain embedded in attitudes of denial, hatred, and silence towards one’s own ethnicity.

Du Bois’s “colour line” remains relevant here. In Dezrobiți, there may appear to be no visible racial boundary since the community has assimilated into Romanian culture. However, the rejection of Romani identity actually highlights the existence of that line. The word “țigan” operates as a racialized label, marking a distinction between free Romanians and enslaved Roma for centuries. The people of Dezrobiți exist within this division, even as they attempt to eradicate it. This is why assimilation is not an adequate description of their identity. Instead, what has developed is a specific form of identity based on rejection: a denial of Romani culture, a refusal of public policies aimed at Romani people, and a desire to be recognised as Romanians. This is not assimilation in the sense of gradual integration but rather a colonised identity centred on self-negation.

Roma who lived near monasteries for centuries developed differently from nomadic Roma. They reject Romani identity most strongly, as they wish to distinguish themselves from nomads and groups stereotypically associated with “long skirts” and deportations to Transnistria during the Holocaust. When they insist that they are not “tsiganes”, they are primarily emphasising that they are not like these other groups. Their identity is relational, defined not by what they are, but by what they refuse to be.

At a family level, memory takes on complex forms. Marianne Hirsch coined the term “postmemory” to describe the transmission of traumatic knowledge from one generation to the next (Hirsch 2008, 103–128). This concept shapes Dezrobiți’s interpretation of its past. Slavery is remembered not in terms of oppression, but of work, dignity, and poverty. By attributing a positive meaning to their history – “We were hard-working, we were poor, but we belonged” – they create a narrative that enhances their local image and facilitates their integration into Romanian society. Thus, slavery becomes a paradoxical source of pride: an element of an identity internally colonised through capture and enslavement that seeks recognition by reframing trauma as virtue.

A salient feature of Dezrobiți’s memory is its isolation. Villagers believe that their community was the only one enslaved because of their village’s name. They do not perceive themselves as part of an imagined Romani community in the sense of Benedict Anderson (1991). Instead, they imagine their community alongside Romanians: school classmates, fellow villagers, and fellow Orthodox believers. Their historical memory is shaped by Romania’s national curriculum, which omits any reference to slavery.

So, how will Dezrobiți come to terms with its past? How can its inhabitants reconcile the shame of being Roma with the impossibility of fully passing as Romanian? Ron Eyerman’s analysis of African-American identity provides a revealing contrast. For African-Americans, the memory of slavery became central to identity formation through collective memory and the persistence of segregation rather than through direct experience (Eyerman in Alexander et al. 2004). In Romania, by contrast, the memory of slavery was largely erased after abolition. Political regimes promoted integration, aiming to “transform Roma into Romanians”, except during the Holocaust period. It is only with the recent emergence of Romani political representation in the last few decades that slavery has begun to resurface as a component of ethnic identity. For the people of Dezrobiți, however, slavery remains a muted trauma, reinterpreted through poverty, silence, and self-rejection. Their identity is not based on the memory of slavery as a shared cultural wound but on the erasure of that memory and the desire to belong to the Romanian nation. It is precisely this erasure, this refusal to remember, that constitutes their cultural trauma.

Conclusions

Methodologically, the article developed and tested an approach capable of uncovering the traces of Romani slavery that persist beyond explicit narratives – within local spaces, institutional continuities, and everyday social relations. This aim was achieved by combining ethnographic sensitivity with cultural-sociological interpretation, reading oikonyms, spatial morphology, and lived experience as mnemonic markers of historical trauma.

Through this integrative methodological framework, this article demonstrates that the memory of slavery does not reside solely in what people recall verbally but also in the material, symbolic, and relational structures that shape their worlds. In this sense, the research fulfils its methodological goal of extending the study of collective memory beyond oral history and written archives, toward a more holistic understanding of how trauma and identity are inscribed in space and transmitted through silence, continuity, and belonging.

“Dezrobiți” has two meanings: on the one hand, it suggests reconciliation with the past, but on the other, it symbolises the colonial past, reminding us of the enslaved Roma of Dintr-un Lemn Monastery and their descendants. As slavery was never acknowledged or accepted publicly by subsequent political regimes following its abolition, the potential for reconciliation inherent in the oikonym was never realised. Instead, over the course of more than a century and a half, its colonial legacy has grown to become a potent symbol of entrenched social hierarchy.

This hierarchy is reproduced through spatial morphology. A series of elements that were once part of nineteenth-century public memory were never fully “translated” into the present, yet they continue to shape local identity. These include the oikonym Dezrobiți; the inclusion of slavery in the official presentation of the commune on the Francești City Hall website; the Archdiocese of Râmnic’s continued use of the old parish name, Mănăstireni; the monastery’s monograph listing Romani slaves as part of its patrimony; the half-hectare land allotments granted in 1864; uninterrupted monastic life at Dintr-un Lemn; and ongoing labour relations linking Romani villagers to the monastery.

My fieldwork shows that trauma is hidden in local culture and reconfigured as a strategy of coexistence between Roma and Romanians, structured by a durable principle of hierarchy. The discourse of recovering the memory of slavery is not confined to contemporary Romani activism. Even in the interwar period, Romani elites attempted to establish this kind of identity discourse. However, this effort remains distant from communities such as Dezrobiți, whose identity has been shaped by mnemonics that testify to an inferior, racialized status rather than collective resistance.

At the local level, terms such as “rob” (slave) and “țigan” are not perceived as symbols of historical oppression but as indicators of poverty. Identity is defined more by social factors than cultural ones. The Romani language is rejected and associated with crime, a stigma reinforced by memories of the deportation of Roma to Transnistria.

These mnemonics serve as ongoing reminders of an unreconciled past. They sustain relations of dependency, reinforce self-hatred, and perpetuate cultural trauma within the racialized boundary that separates the Romani community from the Romanian majority.

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