

"UNCORROBORATED TESTIMONY", TRANSLATING "GYPSINESS" INTO ROMANIAN

Puskás-Bajkó Albina, PhD Candidate, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu-Mureş

Abstract: Linguistic evidence reveals that Roma are originally from northern India and that they migrated out of the area sometime between 800-950 AD. Romani, the Rom language, is descended from Sanskrit and closely related to Hindi. Today Romani exists in many dialects, reflecting the paths of Rom dispersion. Some Rom groups, however, do not presently communicate in Romani, although it is likely that they did at an earlier time. Roma have always been bilingual and in many cases are multilingual. In the southern Balkans, Roma speak Romani plus the local south Slavic language or Turkish, Albanian or Greek.

Keywords: Gipsy, tongue, body-language, figure, stereotypes, understanding, otherness, assimilation

Linguistic evidence reveals that Roma are originally from northern India and that they migrated out of the area sometime between 800-950 AD. Romani, the Rom language, is descended from Sanskrit and closely related to Hindi. Today Romani exists in many dialects, reflecting the paths of Rom dispersion. Some Rom groups, however, do not presently communicate in Romani, although it is likely that they did at an earlier time. Roma have always been bilingual and in many cases are multilingual. In the southern Balkans, Roma speak Romani plus the local south Slavic language or Turkish, Albanian or Greek.

Although scholars differ as to the first reliable documentation of Roma in Europe, we can say with certainty that Roma were established in large numbers throughout the Balkans by the fourteenth century. Most Roma settled on the outskirts of existing communities while others remained nomadic. Reported dates of a Rom presence include 1322 in Crete, 1348 in Serbia, 1370 in Wallachia, 1407 in Germany, 1418 in Zurich, 1419 in France, 1422 in Italy, and 1425 in Spain. Since this time, Roma have been indispensable suppliers of diverse services to non-Roma, such as music, entertainment, fortune-telling, metal working, horse dealing, wood working, sieve making, basket weaving, comb making, seasonal agricultural work, and middleman marketing. Many of these trades required nomadism. Roma are extremely adaptable in the area of occupations and they often practice two or three occupations simultaneously or serially.

Initial curiosity about Roma by European people and rulers quickly gave way to hatred and discrimination in virtually every European region, a legacy which has continued until today. In the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, Roma were slaves from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As bonded serfs owned by noblemen, landowners, monasteries, and the state, they were sold, bartered, flogged, and dehumanized; even their marriages were strictly regulated. As slaves, Roma were an important labor and artisan source, providing skills in gold washing, bear training, woodcarving, blacksmithing, music, etc. Lautari (professional Rom musicians) serfs performed epics and accompanied armies into battle against the Turks. Some musicians belonged to a class of laborers known as laiesi who were allowed to roam in certain areas but were heavily taxed. Although slavery was abolished in 1864, patterns of exploitation have continued.

In other countries, Roma were viewed as outcasts, intruders, and threats, probably because of their dark skin, their association with invading Muslim Ottoman Empire, and their foreign ways. Despite their small numbers, they inspired fear and mistrust and were expelled from virtually every European territory. Bounties were paid for their capture, dead or alive, and repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, prison sentences, whipping, branding, and other forms of physical mutilation. Assimilation was

attempted in the eighteenth century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the reign of Maria Theresa and her son Joseph II by outlawing Romani, Rom music, dress, and nomadism, and banning traditional occupations. Similar assimilationist legislation was enacted in Spain from 1499-1800. In the twentieth century persecution escalated with the Nazi rise to power. Between 1933 and 1945 Roma faced an extermination campaign which is only now being historically investigated. Over 600,000 were murdered, representing between one-fourth and one-fifth of their total population.

There have been made some estimative assumptions that there might be eight million Rroma and Sinti living in Europe – located mostly in the Balkans and in central and Eastern Europe and commonly referred to as ‘Gypsies’ –however, as they are a widely dispersed people, this number is far from the true figure. They do not make up just ‘one people’, but a puzzle of groups scattered across the world. This great dispersion of Romani groups in conjunction with their way of living which doesn’t suppose having a piece of land, has led a number of scholars to identify Roma as dispersed groups. And yet, very few Roma have attempted to formulate their national identity (as one nation or as scattered groups of people). The situation is the same in Transylvania: people witnessing the Rroma lifestyle made attempts to define, categorize and label them- their physical appearance and language being so different from anything seen before: these two have become through the centuries the targets of mockery, but also of attraction.

A reason for this might well be that these diasporic narratives of the Rroma bear resemblance with attempts of authorities and policy-makers to mark Gypsies as ‘different’ and exclude them as undesired and undesirable ‘foreigners’ who in the distant past entered Europe from India. Such labelling is by no means a thing of the past and is not confined to official authorities: in 1995 for example neo-Nazis attacked a Roma settlement in the city of Oberwart in Austria and left there a sign saying “Gypsies go back to India” (when the Roma tried to remove the sign, a bomb went off killing four of them).

The diaspora concept currently enjoys great popularity and has gradually established itself as a key term in both the humanities and the social sciences. Despite the excessive spread of the use of the term ‘diaspora’ over the last twenty years – a proliferation that is perceived by many as a problematic semantic shift from its original meaning that was confined to the Jewish case, researchers tend to agree on what should constitute the basic elements of a real diaspora, like that of the Jews. This can be referred to as the ‘classical’ or ‘analytical diaspora paradigm’.¹

According to the widely quoted definition proposed by William Safran, the key components of this classical diaspora paradigm are

- 1) dispersal from a homeland;
- 2) collective memory of the homeland;
- 3) lack of integration in the host country;
- 4) a ‘myth’ of return and a persistent link with the homeland.²

Robin Cohen (1996:515) supplemented this list of key diaspora features as follows:

- 1) dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions or expansion from a homeland in search of work/for trade/colonial ambitions;
- 2) a collective memory and an idealization of the homeland and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
- 3) the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;

¹ R.Brubaker ‘The “diaspora” diaspora’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(1), 2005, pp. 1-/19

² Safran ‘Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’, *Diaspora* 1(1), 1991, pp. 83-99

- 4) a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;
- 5) a troubled relationship with host societies;
- 6) a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement;
- 7) the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.³

The issue of analytical interpretations of diaspora is that they are written from the perspective of sedentary majority societies and encounter difficulties in grasping the ‘deterritorialised and spatially unbounded culture’⁴ of Roma/Gypsies who are ‘at home’ anywhere, in the sense that they share their home with the non-Gypsies, yet nowhere, since wherever they go they are constantly reminded of their difference and their inability to ‘fit in’ and to be identified with a well-defined national territory. Their situation reminds us of what Agamben describes as the condition of the refugee:

[...] the refugee represents a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state [...] primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis.

[...] the refugee, an apparent marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory...⁵

In the same way as the stateless refugee and the denizen, the Gypsy –their physical appearance, clothing and language– is a ‘disquieting element’ in the order of the nation-state in so far as s/he violates the basic principles of the nation-state and questions what is perceived as a mandatory link between state-nation-territory. This is why, wherever he/she appears, he/she will be „expected” to commit minor or major crimes, not abiding by the laws of the sedentary locals.

Diaspora theorists have nevertheless tried to categorise the Gypsy diaspora on the basis of the definitions outlined above. The Roma/Gypsies do indeed share some defining features of a paradigmatic diaspora. They are a widely dispersed and internally varied group, and their great dispersion is mirrored in the variety of terms and ethnonyms used by Romani groups in defining themselves. Depending on their geographical location, Gypsies call themselves Roma (Rom in the singular) in central, southern and eastern Europe, Romanichals (England, US, Australia and New Zealand), Sinti (Germany, Austria, central and northern Italy, southern France), Kalé in Spain, Manus in France and so forth. As far as the Romani language is concerned, it has been estimated that since the arrival of the Roma in Europe, at least 80 variations and dialects of the Romani language have developed, and not all of them are mutually understandable.⁶ Furthermore, the Gypsy diaspora is characterized by a difficult relationship between ‘Gypsy’ communities and their ‘host’ countries (cf point 3 of Safran’s definition). The Roma and Sinti constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe and they are certainly the least represented and the least protected among the other European minorities. No wonder other nationalities have been so preoccupied with them-looking at them as mere figures. A recent report commissioned by the Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs of the EU revealed that the Roma in the European Union suffer severe discrimination and social exclusion in at least four key areas: education, employment, housing

³ Robin Cohen. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press), 1997, p. 14

⁴ J. Okely. ‘Deterritorialised and Spatially Unbounded Cultures within Other Regimes’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 76(1), 2003, pp. 151-164

⁵ J. Okely. ‘Deterritorialised and Spatially Unbounded Cultures within Other Regimes’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 76(1), 2003, pp. 151-164

⁶ P. Bakker et al. *What is the Romani language?* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press), (2000)

and healthcare (European Commission 2004). The report has also revealed widespread anti-Romani racism and recurrent human rights infringements, not to mention violations of civil and political rights against the Romani minority in Europe. This has been the case ever since they showed up in Europe; though in the beginning they have been welcomed, then enslaved (on the territory of Romania, and also Transylvania, on the territories mostly inhabited by Romanians) one could purchase his/her own Gypsy at a reasonable price in the 19th century. As the report demonstrates, such violations not only occur in the new Central and Eastern EU member-states, but also in older EU member states. The situation of the Roma in Italy is particularly worrying. Italy is known in Europe as ‘Campland’, the country of ‘camps for nomads’ (campi-nomadi) which is where many Roma are forced to live, completely isolated from the rest of the population. This glaring lack of integration of the Roma within their countries of settlement is indeed another crucial element that they seem to share with other diasporic groups.

All foreign visitors to the Romanian territories expressed their shock and horror when seeing the conditions in which Gypsy slaves had to live. The need and desire for an abolitionist movement „was reflected in Romanian literature of the mid-19th century. The issue of the Roma slavery became a theme in the literary works of various liberal and Romantic intellectuals, many of whom were active in the abolitionist camp. Cezar Bolliac published poems such as *Fata de boier și fata de țigan* ("The boyar's daughter and the Gypsy daughter", 1843), *Țiganul vândut* ("Sold Gypsy", 1843), *O țigancă cu pruncul său la Statuia Libertății* ("A Gypsy woman with her baby at the Statue of Liberty", 1848), Ion Heliade Rădulescu wrote a short story named *Jupân Ion* (roughly, "Master John", from the Romanian-language version of *Župan*; 1844), Vasile Alecsandri also wrote a short story, *Istoria unui Galbân* ("History of a gold coin", 1844), while Gheorghe Asachi wrote a play called *Țiganii* ("The Gypsies", 1856)[91] and V. A. Urechia the novel *Coliba Măriucăi* ("Măriuca's cabin", 1855).[92] A generation later, the fate of Ștefan Răzvan was the inspiration for *Răzvan și Vidra* ("Răzvan and Vidra", 1867), a play by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu".⁷

This movement was nevertheless instigated so to say by the much larger movement against Black slavery in the United States as locals had the possibility of studying press reports and a translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Translated by Theodor Codrescu and first published in Iași in 1853, under the name *Coliba lui Moșu Toma sau Viața negrilor în sudul Statelor Unite din America*, it was the very first American novel published in Romanian, and it included a preface by Mihail Kogălniceanu.

The influence of slavery on Romanian civilization became a topic of interest in the years after the Romanian Revolution of 1989. In 2007, Prime Minister Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu approved the creation of *Comisia pentru Studiarea Robiei Romilor* ("Commission for the Study of Roma Slavery"), which should be dealing with recommendations for the Romanian education system and on promoting the history and culture of the Roma. The commission, chaired by Neagu Djuvara, would also focus on the creation of a museum of the Roma culture, a Roma research center, a Roma slavery commemoration day and the building of a memorial dedicated to Roma slavery.⁸

Let us view a few cliché representations and symbols of the Gypsy in Transylvania, using this as a thermometer to what they are supposed to represent in our archetypal thinking.

Thievery

Gypsies in the Market by Hans Burgkmair

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_Romania

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_Romania



Hundreds of Western European accounts mention the Gypsies' tendency to display the behaviour of thievery right from their appearance.⁹ One may find never -ending complaints in every document, and there are documents exemplifying hard regulations too. In the 20th century this changed dramatically and thievery has become a strong stereotype.

Ragged clothing

Ragged, tattered clothing became a visual Gypsy cliché only at the end of the 19th century. Written sources give account of the Gypsies' indifference to their items of clothing being ragged or tattered. This way of wearing their clothes was also part of their tradition. A century later, in 1992, Isabel Fonseca spent some months with an Albanian Gypsy family in a Gypsy colony near Tirana. As she points out¹⁰, one of the most time-consuming activities of the young housewife was the everyday washing and cleaning; they paid great attention to the kitchenware being clean, and the preparations of cooking were taken great care of as well. Nonetheless, they never mended their ragged cloths, since they considered that unnecessary. The strict rules of cleanness -uncleanness conventions created a rigid, often insurmountable framework to their lives (it was, for example, prohibited to wash the clothes of children, women and men together; even the soap had to be swapped); however, no rules dealt with how ragged clothing should be treated. If this phenomenon can be treated as a general tendency –given that most sociologists avoid dealing with the question of tattered clothing, there is hardly any piece of information available on this matter –, in that case a sociocultural specialty has been documented in the pictures, and it would be wrong to evaluate this cultural characteristic by the norms of the majority culture.

Dressing in “Gypsy style”

In early pictures (i.e. before 1850), no dresses can be found which an average Hungarian or Romanian viewer of today would label Gypsy-style; except for the small-gentry-like costume of the musicians, which had turned to its opposite by the first decade of

⁹ A.Fraser. *A cigányok*. Budapest, Europa Kiado, 2006, p. 70.)

¹⁰ I.Fonseca, *Állva temesetek el! A cigányok útja*. Budapest, 2010, p. 71

the 20th century. The others wore simple peasant clothing, and if the then contemporary viewer may have found one or two Gypsy -like details, this knowledge has since faded away. But almost at the same time, in the late 1860s, two new Gypsy styles appeared in the pictures that seem Gypsy -like even for a viewer of today: the Kalderash and the Vlah Gypsy (“oláh cigány” in Hungarian) styles. The former disappeared in the second half of the century, but the latter remained and became a strong visual stereotype and formed at least “the Gypsy-style”.

According to today’s popular opinion, the Gypsy -style costume consists of the following: a hat with a wide brim, a short coat and a waistcoat for men (many times they were represented with a moustache), a colourful headscarf bound on the nape, big, glittering jewels, long flower patterned skirt, sometimes slippers worn by the women. The appearance of this outfit in pictures indicates the appearance of the Vlah Gypsies in the territory. In Hungary, it happened in the last two decades of the 19th century. Before 1900, the Vlah Gypsy outfit was simply one of the visual clichés reflecting Gypsy clothing, and it became dominant only from the middle of the 20th century.

Here is an example of Kaldaresh men’s outfit



Here is an example of Kaldaresh women’s outfit



Erotic visualization

Even before the 20th century there were depictions of the bare breasted Gypsy girl - and this visual cliché has remained popular up until today . It seems to be the case that at the time of its appearance it was an acceptable way of expressing eroticism; and later on it became a commonplace. The underlying reason for this may most probably be a very strong common supposition that Gypsy girls are –to put it this way –easy going, they are considered. to be simply common possessions of non-Gypsy men and anyone has the right when given the opportunity to seduce them.

When those pictures are analysed, in which the intention of artistic representation did not interfere, it turns out that the concept of the coquettish Gypsy girl was the product of a misunderstanding between two cultures . In the view of the Gypsies the concept of bare breasts is completely acceptable, the other, i.e. the one prevailing in most of Europe, considers it intolerable and as the sign of becoming a prostitute. It can be assumed that behind this (and the naked child) lay the concept of the cleanness -uncleanness tradition of the Gypsy culture: according to this view, the human body is considered to be unclean below the waist, thus it should be covered, whereas above the waist it is clean; therefore , there is no reason to cover that part, too. ¹¹ Easy to see in the following anonymous representation.

¹¹ .Fonseca,Állva temessetek el!A cigányok útja.Budapest, 2010,p. 71.



Naked child

This is a visual cliché that is not the most frequent but which is one of the most vivid and strong depictions of so called stereotypical ‘gypsiness’. A great number of photos taken in Hungary and abroad proves that nudity among young children was prevalent even in the last turn of the century; therefore, this visual stereotype is based on real experience. The reason lying behind the surprising custom may have been the cleanness -uncleanness tradition of the Gypsy culture: the human body is clean above the waist and unclean below the waist; the unclean part should be covered, but there is no need to cover the clean part.¹² The young child is entirely clean or, in other words, is free from uncleanness or impurity (since uncleanness is related to sexuality), thus there is no need to cover their body at all. In the case of Gypsy children, the prestige that clothing is surrounded by in the majority of societies plays no significant role. Traditional Gypsy culture did not assign prestigious position to the children; nevertheless, the adults were trying to adapt themselves to the norms dictated by the majority (see headdress, footwear) to a certain extent.

¹² K.Bari, *A cigányokról*. Budapest, 2009. p. 13-14.

Woman smoking pipes



It is the violating of a norm that flourishes even today albeit there is no rational explanation for its existence at all : smoking pipes is reserved only to men; women are not allowed to smoke pipes. Once again the Gypsies are allowed to break the norms or, more precisely put, they are supposed to do so.

There are early written sources of this phenomenon as a conceptual cliché (Contemporary sources report that Panna Cinka, the famous 18th century Gypsy violinist and music group leader used to smoke her pipe even while playing her violin. See Augustini ab Hortis , S. *A magyarországi cigányok mai állapotáról, különös szokásairól és életmódjáról, valamint egyéb tulajdonságairól és körülményeiről*¹³ dating back many centuries and it appeared much later, in the last third of the 19th century as a visual cliché. From that time onwards it comes up frequently, even in the photos which were set and taken in studios. Although it cannot be proven from the documented data, it seems that the Gypsies eventually accepted this cliché and identified themselves with this role; even so as it had no clear negative connotations, it was only considered a curiosity.

Adult barefooted



¹³ Augustini ab Hortis , S. *A magyarországi cigányok mai állapotáról, különös szokásairól és életmódjáról, valamint egyéb tulajdonságairól és körülményeiről*. Budapest/Gödöllő, 2009.009. p.217.

This is one of the most frequent visual clichés. Simultaneously it is a commonplace . Not because the Gypsies never walked barefoot –most presumably they did–, because it was generally the case of the peasants in Hungary at that time. However, in the 17th -19th century peasants were more rarely depicted barefooted than Gypsies. It is obvious that it reflects the common idea of social prestige. When the analysis of the absence of headdress above was made, it would have been possible to add that this was not only the reflection of marginality but also of their sense of freedom and extravagancy. Depictions of Gypsies being barefooted have no such positive connotations, however. It is a clear sign of poverty, what is more, that of subjection. The common opinion made a distinction and ranked the types footwear as well, placing the sandal (the footwear made of one piece of skin, in Hungarian bocskor) at the very end, and the boots at the very beginning of the scale. Using the same principle, they also ranked the people who wore this footwear. Having nothing to put on should express that they were the bottommost members of society.

Bare-headed

Today the headdress is more than just a piece of clothing, because it is worn on the head, the visual centre of the body. Its appearance is more emphasised as well. One of its functions is to symbolise the value (being an adult) of its bearer. Superiority and inferiority relations were very often expressed by whether the headdress was kept on or taken off. In the case of a situation where one man is standing with his hat on and another is standing with his hat in his hand in front of him, we may deduce who the lord and who the inferior is in an instant. It is a late adaptation to the values of the majority that for today the hat has become a prestigious piece of clothing for Gypsy men. One of the current visual clichés of Gypsies includes men wearing hats and women wearing colourful headscarves. One and a half centuries ago the situation was the reverse; almost all major members of society, lords and peasants, adults and children had some kind of headdress in their pictures, but hardly any Gypsies. The contemporary audience at that time probably felt that bare headedness was signifying both freedom (and extravagance) and subjection. If a look is taken at the contemporary photos, it becomes clear that Gypsy adults wore headdresses almost as often as members of the majority. Even in the photographs which were taken in studio settings, there are different headdresses. So far, the artists (and viewers) of the 19th century Gypsy drawings formed an involuntary judgment about the Gypsies by depicting them bareheaded; they considered them as people out of normality, out of orderliness but inferior. Another question is that for a long time the members of the majority accepted the Gypsies as such; they acknowledged their different way of life, even though they did not want to follow their lead. They would most probably have said: “we who wear headdresses are the ordinary, and they are the extraordinary, the bareheaded”. Only one element remains active today from this visual cliché: the old Gypsy woman with long, dishevelled hair. An elderly woman letting her hair down is still not considered to be acceptable by the Hungarian way of thinking; and if somebody wears her hair in such a fashion, she is considered to be someone who contravenes the social norms: a Gypsy, a foul or an artist –that is all the same after all.

Fortune telling, wizardry

Here's a Caravaggio painting which shows exactly this stereotype



Wizardry comes even before metal craftsmanship. This source, from around 1068, includes a Bulgarian legend of a saint mentioning certain “atsinganos”, who brushed off the wild beasts from the gardens of the emperor of Byzantium with their knowledge of wizardry. Although it is not entirely certain that this text refers to the Gypsies, the scholarly sources consider it, similarly to the other instances of atsinganos being mentioned in the forthcoming centuries ¹⁴Therefore, it may be claimed that the Gypsies arrived to Europe with some knowledge of wizardry -at least that is what people assumed in connection with them. In the first half of the 20th century, the visual cliché in the form of the Gypsy woman telling one's fortune and doing cartomancy appeared in Hungary as well, but it bore no connection with real life. This was only the acceptance of the general Western European set of visual clichés, later completed by the special Spanish -French stereotypes (great round earrings, girls dancing with tambourines, etc.). During the first half of the 20th century, the coquettish Gypsy girl showing her snow-white smile and red lips to the audience, or telling fortune by cards had become a strong international visual cliché. Eventually, the role had found its performers and the visual cliché had created reality: the Gypsy fortune teller woman can be found everywhere in Hungary.

Gold washers

There are several written sources concerning the Gypsy gold washers who lived in Early Modern Transylvania . In the 18 th century a very important source, Samuel Agustini identified the gold washers as Beash . One cannot be completely sure as to what extent this identification is correct, since there are no other sources mentioning this from the age of Agustini, nor from later times. What is known for sure, how ever, is that during the

¹⁴ A.Fraser, 2006.A cigányok . Budapest, 2006, p.52.

Principality (16th and 17th century), Gypsy gold washers were well known figures in Transylvania and remained active even in the 18th century. They most probably emigrated from there to the Hungarian Kingdom, where they appeared in the 18th century. A decree of Queen Maria Theresa said that the Gypsy gold washers had certain “privileged associations” in Hungary. It may indicate some kind of organisation, but this presumption should only be accepted with reserve. Those “associations” were rather licensed groups (companies), who were obliged to pay certain taxes and sell the gold they had collected to the state treasury at a given rate (mostly half weighed official gold money). At the end of the 19th century, the Gypsy gold washing practice had finished, mostly because the exhaustion of the digging sites and the development of technologies in gold mining. Therefore, another job opportunity disappeared out of the Gypsies’ sight again. Some gold washer Gypsies gained jobs at the mines in Transylvania, but it ended in a fiasco.

Horse dealers



Horse dealing is considered to be a traditional Gypsy profession not only by the majority of society, but also by the Gypsies themselves - it is part of how they define themselves. This is not entirely correct. Among the surveyed stock of pictures there is only one single piece depicting Gypsy horse trading. The lack of more pieces should guide one to be cautious with hasty judgments. It is known from written sources that buying and selling horses has been considered to be an occupation practiced by the Gypsies for centuries.¹⁵ If there is hardly any depiction of this activity, it must have a single explanation: the stereotype is much stronger than the reality behind it. The contradiction may have been caused partly by the need of a positive Gypsy self-image, a self-identification with this prestigious activity. It was strengthened by the fact that the Gypsies really bought and sold horses quite often. But we also have to add that the majority saw this selling and buying not as real trade. The simple fact is that the Gypsies were always ready to change their horses if they thought they could gain a profit, while the peasants (the majority of society) kept their animals usually for a

¹⁵B. Mezey, *A magyarországi cigánykérdés dokumentumokban*. Budapest, 1986, p. 56

lifetime. Still, a 16th century source reports that the Gypsies “change their horses frequently”. That is where the common opinion comes from.

Musicians

It is worth noting that there seems to be no other identifiable commonplace on the pictures depicting musicians. A testimony of no other fact, than that the majority of Romani musicians, especially with respect to the second part of the 19th century, lead to a much more settled lifestyle than those still errant. That is why errant Romani people had violins, too. However, it is not possible to conclude whether the image constructed in Transylvania about the musician Gypsy merely crammed together different commonplaces into one composition.

These stereotypes are shared by many sedentary people witnessing the Roma lifestyle amongst their houses, and making these assumptions- which proved to be true or false- based on the tests of time.

Despite these shared elements, however, diaspora scholars emphasise the fact that the Roma/Gypsies also lack some crucial diasporic features. This is particularly true for the feature that lies at the core of the classical notion of diaspora, a strong link with a homeland. Safran for example underlines that Roma/Gypsies have ‘no precise notion of their place of origin, no clear geographical focus, and no history of national sovereignty’ and that they are a ‘truly homeless people’. ¹⁶As Barany argues, the Roma/Gypsies ‘are unique in their homelessness’; for them ‘every country is a “foreign” country, a “country of residence”’ ¹⁷ and this is the reason why their communities cannot be defined, as a diaspora. The second crucial diasporic feature that is missing in the Gypsy case is a consciousness of their being a diaspora.

We think of the Roma not in substantialist terms as a bounded identity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim. We think of them in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis. As a category of practice, ‘Gypsy’ is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties, a sense freedom. It is often a category with a strong normative charge. It does not so much describe the world as seek to remake it, as various expressions of freedom-all coming down to a sort of breaking the norm, of being wildly unrestricted, whether we think of the horsedealer or the loose haired, bare chested woman; these positive or negative stereotypes all describe our desire for freedom, imposed on the Roma.

Before analysing the main feature of Gypsy practices, it is worth pointing out that for a long time only the non-Gypsies (Gadžé) have been interested in identifying the Gypsies’ origins, and not the Gypsies themselves ¹⁸. Since the first appearance of Roma/Gypsies in Western Europe, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, there have been constant attempts by Gadžé researchers to trace back their original homeland. The very terms with which the Romani people were originally named testify the incessant search for the Gypsy origins. In

¹⁶ W.Safran. ‘Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’, *Diaspora* 1(1), 1991, pp. 86-87

¹⁷ Z.Barany, ‘Ethnic Mobilization without Prerequisites: The East European Gypsies’, *World Politics* 54, 2002, pp.277–307

¹⁸ L.Piasere, ‘De origine Cinganorum’, *Études et documents balkaniques et méditerranéens* 14, 1989, pp. 105-126

particular the term ‘Egyptians’ (the origin of the English ‘Gypsies’, the Spanish ‘Gitanos’ and the French ‘Gitanes’) derives from the belief, dating back to the late Middle Ages, that they were pilgrims from the Orient – a belief that in all probability the Roma/Gypsies themselves helped to spread¹⁹ among the Gadžé. As will be seen, it is only during the eighteenth century, when linguists discovered the Sanskrit origin of Romanes (the Romani language) that Roma/Gypsies started to be widely associated with India. However, a pervasive tendency still exists among different nations to consider the Roma as incapable of organising themselves, and their attempt at turning their internal diversity into a unified, transnational political movement are regarded by many as simply pointless.

Romani intellectuals have helped shape a common Romani diasporic identity in several ways. They have promoted the study of Romani culture, history and traditions and supported the diffusion of a common Romani language. The standardization of Romanes was achieved in 1990, when the World Romani Congress (WRC) adopted the standard Romani alphabet proposed by Marcel Courtiade. In the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of 1992 Romanes, after already being recognized in several European countries, was granted the status of a non-territorial language (together with Yiddish). Intellectuals regard Romanes as ‘the heart and soul’ of the Romani people, as the factor that ultimately unifies all Romani groups by allowing them to communicate across national borders:

It is our speech which is the greatest part of [Romani common heritage], and even among those populations whose Romani [Romanes] has been reduced to only a vocabulary, as in England or Spain or Scandinavia, it remains a powerful ingredient in Romani ethnic identity.²⁰

The diffusion of Romanes has been encouraged through a number of written publications and journals, with both national and international circulation, aimed at overcoming linguistic and physical barriers and promoting a better knowledge of Romani history and culture. A more recent trend has been the launch of online news and journals in Romanes and the creation of an impressive number of Romani websites and chat groups, which ‘have become one of the main mobilization tools for Romani activism’.²¹

For analytical purposes, we can distinguish between ‘external’ conditions and ‘internal’ factors that led to an ‘ethnic awakening’²² of the Romani community. The Roma have lived for a long time as a dispersed minority existing at the margins of the dominant society. This marginality is double-faced: it is on the one hand functional to their socio-economic system, allowing the Roma to minimise the risks of cultural assimilation and to confirm their identity and their particular lifestyle. This marginality leads to ‘political invisibility’ and exclusion from the public sphere. A main result of this exclusion has been for a long time the forgetting of the Romani Holocaust. On the other hand, Roma’s marginality is the result of active social exclusion on the part of the dominant group, and demands the

¹⁹ A.Fraser. *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell), 1992, p.62

²⁰ I.Hancock, D. Siobhan, and R.Djurić, (eds) *The Roads of the Roma* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press), 1998, p. 18

²¹ I.Klímová-Alexander, *The Romani Voice in World Politics: The United Nations and Non-State Actors* (Aldershot: Ashgate), 2005, p. 18

²² N. Gheorghe, and A.Mirga, *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper* (Princeton: PER), 1998, p.1

political mobilization of Roma/Gypsies based on affirmative action and on what Charles Taylor calls ‘the politics of recognition’²³

As already remarked, the most enthusiastic supporters of a global diasporic Roma community are the members of the International Romani Union.(IRU) In 2000, during the Fifth Romani World Congress, the IRU called for the recognition of the Romani people as a transnational, non-territorial nation unified by a common Indian origin:

We ask for being recognized as a Nation, for the sake of Roma and non-Roma individuals, who share the need to deal with [today’s] new challenges. We, a Nation of which over half a million were exterminated in a forgotten Holocaust, a Nation of individuals too often discriminated, marginalized, victim of intolerance and persecution, we have a dream, and we are engaged in fulfilling it. We are a Nation, we share the same tradition, the same culture, the same origin, the same language: we are a Nation. We have never looked for creating a Roma State [...]

To conclude, Gypsy stereotypes and images have been and are internally/externally diversified phenomena throughout history and all over Europe, not only in Transylvania, or Romania. This is largely due to their nature as social practices, thereby intrinsically context-specific and subject to change. Furthermore, the plurality of voices within the Gypsy diaspora discourse reflects the great differentiation of Romani groups and their diverse situation in their host countries – what Gheorghe and Acton have defined as the ‘Gypsy archipelago’²⁴

The representatives of Romani intelligentsia have adopted the diasporic frame for purposes of identity-building. In reconstructing the history of the Gypsy diaspora, the Roma elite and not only, write about Romani history, but in a way as to create it *ab initio*. They regard this act of re-writing as necessary in order to regain possession of an image monopolized and often distorted by the majority group. In their view, historical ‘reconstruction’ and ‘deconstruction’ of stereotypes are interrelated. Gypsy practices have supplied the Roma/Gypsies with an essential course of direction cultural/political/historical self-expression, allowing the emergence of the Roma as key figures with their own collective sense of their own programme for what needs to be done, while at the same time opening up new possibilities for collaboration between Gypsies and non-Gypsies.

References

- AGAMBEN, G. (1993) *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press)
- AUGUSTINI ab Hortis, S. *A magyarországi cigányok mai állapotáról, különös szokásairól és életmódjáról, valamint egyéb tulajdonságairól és körülményeiről*. Budapest/Gödöllő, 2009.009.
- BAKKER, P. et al. (2000) *What is the Romani language?* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press)

²³ C.Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and the ‘Politics of Recognition’* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992, pp.25-73

²⁴ N. Gheorghe, and T.Acton) ‘Citizens of the World and Nowhere’, in W. Guy (ed.), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press), , 2001 pp. 54-70

- BARANY, Z. (2002) 'Ethnic Mobilization without Prerequisites: The East European Gypsies', *World Politics* 54,
- BARI, K. (2009) *A cigányokról*. Budapest
- BRUBAKER, R. (2005) 'The "diaspora" diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(1), pp. 1/19
- COHEN, R. (1997) *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press)
- FONSECA, I. (1996) *Bury Me Standing* (London: Vintage)
- FONSECA, I. (2010) *Állva temessetek el! A cigányok útja*. Budapest
- FRASER, A. (1992) *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- FRASER, A. (2006) *A cigányok*. Budapest, Europa Kiado
- GHEORGHE, N. and ACTON, T. (2001) 'Citizens of the World and Nowhere', in W. Guy (ed.), *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press), pp. 54-70
- GHEORGHE, N. and MIRGA, A. (1998) *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: A Policy Paper* (Princeton: PER)
- HANCOCK, I. (1987) *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Persecution and Slavery* (Ann Arbor: Karoma)
- HANCOCK, I., SIOBHAN, D. and DJURIC, R. (eds) (1998) *The Roads of the Roma* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press)
- KLIMOVA-ALEXANDER, I. (2005a) *The Romani Voice in World Politics: The United Nations and Non-State Actors* (Aldershot: Ashgate)
- MEZEY, B. (1986) *A magyarországi cigánykérdés dokumentumokban*. Budapest
- OKELY, J. (1983) *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- PIASERE, L. (1989) 'De origine Cinganorum', *Études et documents balkaniques et méditerranéens* 14, pp. 105-126
- SAFRAN, W. (1991) 'Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora* 1(1)
- TAYLOR, C. (1992) 'The Politics of Recognition', in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism and the 'Politics of Recognition'* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), pp.25-73
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_Romania