

Roma Culture: An Introduction

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The Roma usually identify themselves and one another based on the external features of language, appearance (in particular women's dress), and occupations (in particular men's occupations). Internal features such as customs, practices and attitudes constitute additional identifying characteristics but are more likely to vary among different groups. Some aspects of language, dress, and occupation may also vary. When discussing a population as dispersed as the Roma, it is therefore essential to consider internal diversity as well as similarities. Not all Roma populations use the word Roma to designate their ethnic group, but this word usually appears in some derivation or other either in the name of the language spoken by the group (romanes, romaneh, roman, romacilikanes, etc.), or in the terms used within the group to denote 'husband' and 'wife' (rom and romni). In this way, we can define the boundaries of the population that one might refer to collectively as Roma or Romani.

ORIGINS

The Roma language is the most obvious indicator of the origin of the Roma population. The language is closely related to early modern languages of central and northern India, and appears to have separated from them in the second half of the first millennium CE. This is usually considered the time period during the which the ancestors

of today's Roma population moved out of India, ultimately to reach Anatolia and southeastern Europe and subsequently other regions of the European continent.

The origin of Roma cultural practices is much less obvious. Some observers, activists and even some researchers have tended to search for similarities between the culture of the Roma and those of the Indian subcontinent in dress, food preparation, music,

dance, burial customs, and more. On the other side, a well-established tradition of research in social anthropology has been able to identify countless similarities between the socio-economic organisation of the Roma as (traditionally) a peripatetic or travelling community, and the customs and beliefs of travelling communities of non-Indian origins. Finally, Roma culture is influenced by contacts with the respective settled populations.

SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Roma society is based around the group of close kin, which in most traditional Roma communities forms a single household. In settled communities, members of the extended family share living quarters. In travelling communities extended families travel together and share resting sites. Regardless of type of dwelling, the extended family is the unit within which resources are

shared, work is organised, and food is prepared and shared. The typical household unit will include the head of the family and his wife, their married sons and daughters-in-law (*borja*) with their children, as well as unmarried sons and daughters and occasionally divorced or widowed daughters who return to the parental household.

Beyond the extended kin group, most Roma identify as belonging to a 'nation' or specific ethnic sub-group. This includes kin groups that

may or may not be directly related but share external features such as the specific variety of the Roma language, a particular dress code, such as the type of headscarf or apron, length and style of skirt, and hairstyle, for women, or the style of hat, and presence and style of moustache, among the men. The 'nation' or ethnic sub-group often shares a traditional region of settlement or origin, as well as a typical profile of occupations and trades. In southeastern Europe, ethnic sub-groups tend to de-

rive their names from their traditional or historical trade. Sometimes, group names are derived from the region of settlement or the religion adopted by the group.

Members of an ethnic sub-group or ‘nation’ usually intermarry. They tend

to share customs surrounding important life-cycle events such as birth, marriage, and burial, as well as festivities, and they often share values, attitudes and fashions in a variety of domains. An ethnic sub-group usually shares the same kind of

leadership and conflict-resolution structures. Members of the ethnic sub-group have a duty to attend burials of other members, even if they were not personally acquainted with the deceased or their close family.

GENDER ROLES AND OCCUPATIONS

Both men and women have roles within the household itself as well as in trade relations with outsiders, but these roles are typically regulated in different ways. Women are in charge of preparing food and cleaning the household, while men are usually in charge of production that takes place within the household, for example the production of tools such as baskets or copperware that are sold to customers. Both men and women take care of children within the household, including on those occasions where one of the parents is working outside the house. Care of children takes place within the household unit, and so children are often in the care of adults who are not their parents. Both men and women entertain and perform both within the households and professionally as storytellers, singers, and danc-

ers, though only men tend to play musical instruments.

Outside the household, women tend to engage in economic activities that bring them in contact with a wide, general public rather than with just a selected, particular trade niche. In some countries they collect materials which they then trade, or engage in door to door hawking or selling of small artefacts. Frequent occupations of women in very traditional Roma communities are begging and fortune-telling. Men on the other hand engage in more specialised trade, which takes place at markets or with designated trade partners. Collection of scrap material for recycling is an activity that men share with women, though men will tend to specialise in metal objects. Men travel by car to provide door-to-door specialised household services such as tarmac construction, installing gutters or windows, or cutting trees. Specialised, well-established craftsmen produce musical instruments and the rela-

tively well-off among the Roma tradesmen typically sell cars, carpets, art, or antique furniture. Men and women work as seasonal labourers in many communities.

Gender roles tend to be ritualised around ceremonies marking birth, marriage, and death. Women do not usually travel on their own to represent their close family at burials, but may accompany their husbands to do so. Marriage will usually require the consent of the bride’s parents, for which the groom’s family makes a formal request. In more traditional communities, a bride price is arranged as compensation to the bride’s family, though dowries also exist. Marriage by elopement is common in many communities. Almost invariably, married women will join their husband’s household, giving rise to a special relationship between the husband’s mother, who is usually the head female in the family, and her daughters-in-law (*borja*). Marriage within the ethnic sub-group is preferred.

MORALITY, SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

The oral traditions of the Roma have often been regarded by outsiders as an antiquated system of “taboos”. In fact, life in Roma communities is tightly regulated by a code of practice, which in turn is governed by a series of traditions and values. These practices vary among Roma communities, as can be expected from an oral culture that is practised in geographically dispersed and socially isolated communities. The main pillar of Roma morality is an abstract and symbolic distinction between what is sometimes termed “shame” and “good-fortune”, for which the typical Roma terms are *ladž* and *baxt*

respectively. Another way of referring to this polarity of practices is “pure” and “impure”; this terminology is not directly present in Romani, though many Roma communities have a concept that indicates the “impure” or ritually “unclean” (*mahrime*, *maxado*, or *magardo*).

The polarity applies to a series of domains including food, cleanliness, the body, and conversation topics. The upper body is considered free of shame, and men and women alike are allowed to expose parts of their upper body without losing respect or disrespecting others (hence the stereotype of the seductive Gypsy woman). The lower body, on the other hand, is considered unclean, and Roma will avoid exposing it. They will also avoid any contact, direct or

indirect, between the lower body and the upper body. This means that clothes that cover the different body parts must be washed separately, and that separate towels and even separate wash basins are used to wash and dry the upper and the lower body. Contact between lower body and food utensils is especially avoided. Women’s lower clothing, such as skirts and aprons, are considered especially polluted, as is any other association with menstrual blood, both verbal and material. Men can be defiled by coming into contact in public with a woman’s skirt or underwear, and dishonoured by direct or indirect reference in public to birth, pregnancy, or menstruation. Women in turn are dishonoured by public mention of sexual acts. Reference to any such topics

is therefore avoided in mixed company.

In more traditional Roma communities, the notion of contact between a woman's lower body and men's food or upper bodies is extended considerably in its symbolism, and women are expected to avoid stepping over any utensil that might be associated with food (thus sitting on a dining table or coffee table is strictly forbidden), and over water sources such as a well or a water container. Many traditional Roma families in western and northern Europe prefer to live in caravans because they allow them to avoid a situation in which a sexually active woman might walk above the heads of men (simply by walking through a higher level of the same house or building). Caravans are also considered cleaner since they allow clearly displayable separation of the water sources and spaces that are used for washing and cooking (both outside the caravan) and so prevent any suspicion of contamination (e.g. through adjacency of toilets and kitchens). In central and eastern Europe, most Roma live in one-story accommodation and share washing and kitchen spaces, and so suspicions of this kind can be more easily avoided. In some Roma communities, women do not participate in the preparation of food during their menstrual period or just after giving birth; this is easily managed by sharing food preparation in the larger household.

Since non-Gypsies (*Gadže*) do not observe any of these rules, they are often considered "shameless" or "dishonourable", and close contact with them, especially the sharing of food, is avoided. Many traditional Roma people will not eat food that is prepared by *Gadže*, or even by Roma of another ethnic subgroup whose notion of shame and honour might differ in the detail from those acceptable in one's own group. Some Roma are happy to offer food to *Gadže*, but will not reuse any food utensils that were touched or used by their non-Roma guests for fear of pollution.

The notions of shame and pollution extend to the dichotomy of life and death, too. Most Roma communities have elaborate and highly

codified mourning rituals that involve congregating with representatives of other families from the same 'nation' or ethnic sub-group for a wake that may last several days, avoiding cooked food and greetings, and commemorations at regular intervals until one year after the burial. Often, a certain dress code is imposed on close members of the family, and sometimes also the avoidance of certain foods, until one year after the burial. Once the mourning period has ended, however, the proximity to the dead is considered as literally haunting and as a disturbance of the separation between life and death. Travelling Roma will tend to avoid returning to the place in which a close family relation died, and memory of the dead person's individuality is often erased by destroying (often burning) the person's possessions. In England and Wales, it was customary until recently to burn a dead man's caravan with all his belongings. Returning to a place of death or sleeping in proximity to a burial site are believed to carry the risk of confrontation with ghosts, which in Romani are referred to as *mule* or "the dead". Most Roma will avoid referring to dead relations by name, and will simply use the general term "our dead people" (*amare mule*) to denote ancestors who are no longer among the living.

Due to the necessity of relying on recognised, official institutions for burial, the Roma have had to join one of the officially recognised, mainstream religions in the various regions in which they live. The overwhelming tendency, historically at least, is to adhere to the most influential and most powerful religious institution of the region. Roma are thus Catholic in Spain, Lutheran in northern Germany, Orthodox in Romania, and Muslim in many areas of the southern Balkans. Typically, the principal or even the only religious ceremonies that Roma partake in and for which they require the services of clergy from the respective religious institutions are burial itself, and the ceremonies through which

they gain membership in the religious order in the first place, namely baptism or circumcision, respectively. For these events, Roma invite an authorised minister of religion, and will often make generous donations to the appropriate office or institution. Otherwise, Roma tend, on the whole, not to participate in religious services, whether weekly prayers or religious festivals. Weddings are entirely a private family affair, and Roma usually do not involve ministers of religion in them, nor do they register marriages with the state. The consent of the family and its acceptance of an alliance between a man and a woman are all the authority that is needed to make a marriage recognised in the community.

Pilgrimages occupy an interesting position in the spiritual and religious world of the Rom. A number of general pilgrimage destinations that serve a wide population of believers have been adopted by Roma in different parts of Europe and are considered by them to be characteristic Roma places of gathering. Another such meeting point are travelling religious conventions as practised by modern evangelist movements. Evangelist movements began to spread among the Roma of western Europe and north America in the 1950s, recruiting a large membership from the 1970s onwards. Missions have become popular among eastern European Roma since the mid-1990s. The de-centralised character of most of these churches allows the Roma to define an institutional space within which Roma values and family networks can be overtly maintained and celebrated, while at the same time reducing the friction potential with the outside world by defining public gatherings as religious conventions. Roma missionary movements have to some extent re-branded Roma identity by bringing together traditional practices with references to Christianity and the institutionalised administration of an organisation that is respected by *Gadže* authorities and is at the same time allowed its full autonomy to practise its own activities.

FASHION AND DISPLAY

Roma culture tends to emphasise the display of wealth and prosperity, household decoration as a token of cleanliness, and generosity. In most traditional communities, women will tend to wear golden bracelets and necklaces and headscarves are decorated with golden coins. Caravans and apartments will often have an altar-like corner in which religious icons are displayed along with fresh flowers and golden and silver ornaments. Roma who can afford them will invest much of their money in new and expensive cars or caravans. Prosperity displayed in this way is considered honourable and a token of good fortune. Generosity is similarly considered honourable, and a display of hospitality by offering food and gifts is a proper way to celebrate friendship or mark the end of disputes, or to share the success of a business venture. Generosity toward

others in the community is an investment in a network of social relations on which individual Roma and their families rely in the event of economic or other hardship. For this reason, traditional Roma will generally prefer to spend money earned in a successful transaction on gifts and other tokens of generosity, rather than to save it in a bank account.

Investments however are sometimes made in items of symbolic capital, the value of which is primarily internal to the community. Horses often constitute such items, and although they also often have an outside market value, they are bred and traded within the community at an internal value. Among some of the Roma communities of Transylvania, silver beacons are traded as investments and their value is determined by their orally transmitted history of ownership within the community. Among the English Gypsies, carved wooden caravans representing nostalgic Traveller culture are items of

display and may have a value that is significantly higher than their outside market value.

The sharing of wealth is in line with the attitude that one's best time is spent in leisure with one's family members. A key value in Roma communities is to reduce the time spent on economic activity to a necessary minimum in order to make the best use of one's time with family members. Such attitudes, which are often perceived by outsiders as laziness, can only be maintained through self-employment. Roma therefore prefer not to work for others as employees, as far as possible, and organise their work within the family unit. Political and economic reality have overridden such preferences in the past, especially in eastern European countries, where Roma were forced into wage employment in state-run industry during the communist era, and where they have often had to rely on seasonal labour, both before and after communism.

LEADERSHIP

Since the family is the most important unit in Roma society, it is the head of the household who is the most immediate and most relevant leadership figure for most Rom. By default, this role falls to the eldest man in the extended household, though sometimes an enterprising and particularly successful son may take on the more strategic aspects of deciding the families priorities, leaving the more ceremonial aspects of representing the family to an elderly father or uncle. Beyond the extended household, leadership is a function that is related to specific tasks and contexts.

Many Roma communities have the institution of a court (often called *kris*) which is entrusted with community-internal conflict resolution. The primary function of the court is to secure the agreement of conflicting parties to a compromise solution, and thus to remove conflict, as far as possible without involving outside authorities. Courts tend to

have tightly-regulated procedures that are transmitted orally between generations, and are therefore prone to change and modification and thus appear in slightly different forms in each and every group. Courts may either propose a *modus vivendi* to the conflicting parties, or in the case of an injustice that has been brought about one of the parties the court may impose penalties on the guilty party. Court procedures can be initiated by individuals arguing against other individuals; however, they are ultimately seen as a process of mediation between the families of the two parties involved. Conflicts within families are resolved by the head of the family and are seldom brought before the court.

Although procedures are regulated, there is usually no permanent membership of courts. Instead, individuals whose experience and impartiality are agreed on are invited by the conflict parties to serve as arbiters in the specific proceedings on their case. Among some Roma populations, recognition of arbiters is informal, and individuals may simply enjoy a reputation of experienced arbiters who

are frequently summoned to participate in courts. Among others, successful arbiters hold a life-long title – e.g. *rechtsprechari* among the Sinte of Germany. Among the Roma of central Poland the institution of the court is missing. In its place we find, exceptionally, a single person in a position of authority– the *šero Rom* or ‘head Rom’. The title is usually passed on to a son, nephew or other close relation of the predecessor in agreement with the heads of relevant families, and is thus a kind of combination of hereditary and elected office. There are few other examples of individuals in such a position of authority over an entire community. Many Roma settlements have a recognised person in authority, usually the head of one of the more influential families, who is often referred to as a ‘head man’ (*baro*, or *Rom baro*). This person's authority is usually derived from his family's status, wealth and influence among the local Roma community. This authority is often amplified by external recognition through local or regional officials seeking a dialogue of some kind or other with the Roma community.

Many Roma communities have a history of showcase-appointment of kings, dukes, and princes. In many cases, the main purpose of events such as ‘coronations’ is to attract attention to a person who is already a mediator or a respected community personality by romanticising his role in accordance with outsiders’ stereotype images of the Rom. At the same time coronation events provide an opportunity to generate income and are thus seen as performances to an outside audience. Most figures presented as kings and dukes lack authority beyond their immediate community; even within the confines of their community that authority might not exceed that of the head of a single household, or alternatively it may be derived from external recognition as a mediator rather than through service or recognition within the community itself.

There is a growing network of political activists who are ideologically motivated and committed to act to improve

Roma social and political participation. These activists have been lobbying governments, charities, and multilateral organisations for many years now, and have been seeking to trigger a discussion within Roma communities about change and participation. In many traditional Roma communities, such activities are regarded as belonging to the world of the *Gadže*, and are only of interest if they can deliver immediate concrete results, either in the form of improvement of living conditions, or in providing sources of income in one form or another. But networking activity of this kind has already succeeded in establishing a domain of Roma life and Roma interaction that is external to traditional Roma society, yet not assimilated entirely into majority society, either. So far, the main form of expression of these activities is within NGO activities such as conferences and the drafting of cultural and educational material, journalism, and online ex-

change of opinions. It is a domain that involves perhaps several thousand young people, but is acting as inspiration, potentially, to many more who are in search of a way to modernise Roma identity.

In this respect, Roma society is gaining new types of role models who act as leaders within smaller circles and sectors of Roma society. Roma participation in political life is not uncommon in many central and southeastern European countries, and in some regions Roma parliamentarians have been elected by a largely Roma vote, offering the very first signs of a genuine constituency-based representation. The lobbying power of groups of activists has culminated in the establishment of a permanent European Roma and Traveller Forum as an interest group recognised by the Council of Europe as representing Roma interests, whose officers are elected by an assembly of delegates of Roma NGO’s from all over Europe.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The Roma language is the most obvious characteristic of Roma culture. A person whose family language is Romani is considered to be a Rom. Romani is generally spoken in the family, and with other Roma who may or not be related. It is usually absent from schools, media, and public institutions. But in recent years there have been many initiatives all over Europe to establish Romani-language media such as newspapers, radio and television programmes, and websites. Especially electronic communication in Romani via chat forums and email networks is flourishing. There is no official written version of Romani, and users of these media usually improvise a form of spelling that mirrors their own local pronunciation of the language.

Various features of the Roma language represent cultural notions that are specific to the Rom. Perhaps the most obvious is the absence of ‘neutral’ words for ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘boy’ and ‘girl’,

and ‘husband’ and ‘wife’. When using any of these concepts, speakers must specify whether the individual that is being referred to is an insider, i.e. part of the group (e.g. a *Rom* ‘man’ or *romni* ‘woman’), or an outsider (usually *gadžo* ‘man’ or *gadži* ‘woman’). A further noteworthy feature of the language is the tendency to create new names for surrounding nations, rather than simply adopt a word that is similar in sound to those nations’ self-appellation. In the Balkans, for instance, Greeks are referred to by the Roma as *balame*, Turks and Muslims in general are referred to *koraxane*, the latter derived from the name of the Karakhanide medieval Turkic state in Central Asia. Orthodox Christians are referred to as *das*, an Indic word meaning ‘slave’, in a word play based on the similarity to term ‘Slavs’ in Greek (as in English), and across Europe Jews are called *bibolde* or ‘non-baptised’. Attempts to associate the origin of customs and beliefs with the origin of individual terms denoting them have not always proven fruitful, however. Some ancient Indic terms are used for Christian concepts acquired in all

likelihood in Europe, as in *rašaj* ‘priest’ and *trušul* ‘cross’. On the other hand, terms like *kris* ‘court’ and *magardo* ‘polluted’ are derived from Greek, though the associated concepts are often believed to be much more ancient. For this reason, attempts to use the composition of Romani vocabulary to reconstruct the ‘original’ Roma culture or the environment from which the ancestors of the Roma originated have usually proved futile.

The fact that the Romani language has been retained for such a long time testifies to its important role as a token of identity. Traditional Roma families will usually insist on speaking Romani within the family and in all interaction with other Rom. However, language learning is considered a natural, necessary skill, and children are accustomed from a very young age to learn the languages of the surrounding populations. Romani remains the language of emotion and the language that is used among Roma, and therefore children and adults alike will tend to switch back into Romani when addressing fellow Roma, whether family

members or strangers. This has little to do with ‘secrecy’, which is often the perception that outsiders associate with such language preferences, and more to do with language acting as a symbol of identity and emotion, and as a further boundary separating the outer world from the world of the Rom. Some Roma communities,

however, have abandoned Romani as the everyday language of the family, as a result of pressure from the authorities and a policy of direct repression by imposing penalties on language use. This has been the case in most Scandinavian countries, in Britain, in Spain and Portugal, and in parts of Hungary. It is interesting that

even in these regions, Roma communities continue to use vocabulary derived from the Romani language, which they embed into conversations in the majority language (English, Portuguese, and so on). In this way, language continues to serve as a boundary between insiders and outsiders.

RELATIONS WITH OUTSIDERS

There is no doubt that a process of modernisation is underway in many Roma communities, and that awareness of the Roma and measures to recognise and support them are in turn having a gradual effect on removing traditional obstacles that stood in their way toward full participation in society. In this respect, the Roma are very slowly acquiring a position of an ethnic minority whose characteristics are primarily a common history, language, oral traditions and community-internal structures, and not necessarily a separate socio-economic sector. However, when examining traditional Roma society there is no doubt that the distinct identity of the Roma involves, historically at least, a very particular kind of sector-based economy, and that it is this feature of Roma identity that is tightly connected to the way relations with the outside world are regulated from the Roma perspective.

Roma economy is traditionally a non self-sufficient economy. It is a trade and service economy, which depends on continuous relationship with outsiders. Being Roma therefore inherently defines a particular set of relationship with outsiders. Basically, the outside world is seen from the Roma perspective as an opportunity to make a living. This is not to say, of course, that the Roma do not and have not taken on traditions and fashions from the surrounding population. Most settled Roma communities are even tightly connected to their regions of settlement and to certain aspects of the cultures that prevail there. Nonetheless, the dominant relationship to outsiders is an exchange relationship of goods and services. In this kind of

partnership, the Roma regard themselves as the more flexible, since they are not constrained by a commitment to particular forms of production but are able to easily exploit new market opportunities. Their mobility, the organisation of work in small family units that can be trusted and coordinated effectively, their adaptability to new situations and willingness to learn new skills, their reluctance to be constrained by fixed rules and willingness to take risks where necessary, and finally their insistence on being self-employed – all this provides the Roma with a notion of greater freedom and hence superiority over the *Gadže*, who are seen as lacking flexibility and imagination and pinned down to fixed routines and tight regulation by others.

The marginal position that the Roma tend to occupy in society and the fact that they are more likely to suffer from poverty and all the disadvantages that are related to it are compensated for through a feeling of moral superiority by being able to feel shame and honour, a distinction that *Gadže* society is seen as lacking. Thus *Gadže* are seen as obsessed with protecting meaningless personal possessions. The Roma on the other hand share and can therefore rely on the support of their close kin. They follow strict codes of cleanliness and purity, and express joy and sorrow overtly, and can thus protect themselves spiritually from falling victim to selfishness and apathy. Regardless of the activity that they pursue at any given moment in order to make a living, the Roma will retain their honour by providing for their family in a way that is their own choice, knowing that it is up to them to decide when the day’s earnings are sufficient to be able to go back home

and prioritise leisure time with one’s close relations. While many will no doubt envy the *Gadže* for their, on the whole, higher living standards, they will also pity them for not having the freedom to prioritise family life in the way the Roma do.

In utilising market and custom opportunities, traditional Roma capitalise on various available skills. They tend not to recognise any fundamental division between productive-manufacturing skills, such as basket-weaving or carpet restoration, and strategies that are regarded by outsiders as ‘parasitic’, such as begging. The latter belongs potentially to a repertoire of salesmanship and entertainment skills, much like other forms of performance, which may include both selling used cars and fortune-telling, as well as recognised artistic activities such as dancing, singing and playing music. Securing welfare benefits and personal handouts is thus just as honourable as negotiating for permission to set up camp on a private piece of land, which in turn is as honourable as knocking on doors and offering to exchange goods. The way in which *Gadže* judge such activities is unimportant, since the Roma system of honour and shame is self-contained and not influenced by outsiders. Thus stealing may be dispreferred as a means of making a living because of the risks attached to it, rather than in recognition of the value that *Gadže* attach to small items of personal possession. Because little importance is attached to *Gadže* attitudes, Roma are also unembarrassed to exploit outsiders’ image of Gypsies – as poor, as scavengers, as sorcerers, as seductive, or as craftsmen; there is no ‘shame’ in relation to outsiders, since there is also no opportunity to appear honourable to outsiders.

Traditional values can be found among wealthy Roma in some regions, too. The fact that in various locations in Romania, Poland and elsewhere Roma have been successful entrepreneurs without having to give up their traditional values no doubt reinforces the view in their community that integration and assimilation are not necessarily the key to improve their standard of living, and in-

deed that much can be gained by relying on one's traditional skills and resources. Social attitudes will often change, however, when Roma families move up a social ladder that affects their professional standing, not just their economic standing. Roma who choose to pursue professional careers, where they work alongside *Gadže* colleagues, and to provide their children with a mainstream education, becomes

sensitive to the attitudes of *Gadže*. When sympathetic attitudes from *Gadže* become important, begging and stealing become taboo. Like any other society, Roma society is thus not static, caught in a web of traditions that will never be broken. It is, rather, dynamic and responsive to the changes in the attitudes that the outside world adopts toward the Roma, however slow and unreliable these changes may be.

THE POSITION OF SCHOOL AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Traditional Roma families educate their children by allowing them to participate in all family activities, including in economic activities. Children observe, participate, and gradually assume a share of responsibility for the extended household. There is no initiation ceremony and no formal testing of acquired skills or knowledge. School is a *Gadže* institution. It represents everything that outsiders stand for, and everything that separates Roma from outsiders: Rigid rules, obedience toward a person in authority who is not part of the family, oppression of children's own initiative and withholding responsibility from them, imposition of arbitrary schedules, and perhaps the most difficult of all, partition of children from the rest of their family for long hours. School is thus seen as interfering, potentially, with everyday Roma life. Indeed, it is seen as a threat since it removes children from their parents' sphere of influence, and weakens their confidence in the ways and traditions of the Roma household.

The school situation thus conflicts with Roma morality, with its protection of the family unit, and with the natural direction of education in the Roma home, which teaches children to rely on their own assessment of a situation rather than to follow strict formulaic behaviour instructions. For travelling Roma households, or those who rely on their children's support in seasonal work, obligatory school attendance also constitutes a practical obstacle. Finally, mixing with non-Roma children in adolescence carries with it the danger of ro-

mantic liaisons with outsiders that threaten to alienate Roma children from their homes and traditions, and even to separate them from their families permanently. In many countries of central and eastern Europe, integration with other children was limited as a result of the almost automatic referral of Roma children to special needs schools. Such schools only contributed, however, to the stigmatisation of the Roma, while still disrupting traditional family life and weakening parents' ability to act as successful role models.

In most Roma communities, it is now recognised that school cannot be avoided at younger ages. Families reluctantly send their children to school, hoping at least that they will benefit from the opportunity to acquire some key skills such as basic literacy, which can prove useful to the family as a whole. Many Roma communities have learned to integrate the presence of the school institution into their Roma way of life, by regarding school as the first concentrated opportunity that their children have to observe the ways of the *Gadže* and to practice the maintenance of the demarcation line between Roma and *Gadže*. Traditional Roma suspicion towards schools as *Gadže* institutions is almost invariably reinforced by hostile attitudes toward Roma children on the part of the majority children and their parents, and very often by the teachers and the school establishment. This adds to the pain of Roma parents, who feel reluctant yet forced to abandon their children to the emotional and often physical abuse of being an unwanted minority in an unwelcoming environment, ignorant of their own needs and values and confident in the supremacy of its own.

The strategy that most traditional Roma families prefer to pursue is to send their children to primary school, allowing them relative freedom of attendance and even encouraging them to skip school occasionally as a way of signalling that loyalty to the family and participation in important family events has precedence over anything else. As parents, they will attempt to maintain respectful but distanced relationship with the school, always siding with their children in the event of conflict as yet another way to teach their children the value of mutual support and reciprocal loyalty. Together with their children they will endure any hardships encountered by them at school, reminding themselves that this is an opportunity for the children to obtain a close understanding of *Gadže* values and priorities, an understanding on which they can later on draw in transactions with the *Gadže*.

Most Roma parents withdraw their children from school before they reach puberty. Parents often give several reasons for this. Most commonly cited is the fear of drugs, violence and other threatening behaviour that is often associated with secondary schools especially in deprived areas. Another is the fear of alienation from their home environment, and yet a further, more specific reason is the fear that boys and girls might be called to participate together in sex education classes, which, in the Roma context, would shame them and require much effort to restore their honour in the eyes of others within the Roma community. But it is not just sex education that is the cause of the anxiety; due to its content it is cited overtly as the most symbolic of situations that might bring shame upon the

young adolescents. In fact, once children reach puberty they become responsible and so susceptible to the conditions of shame and honour in any potential situation. At this stage of their lives, they must

therefore return to the community where every aspect of their behaviour can be scrutinised to make sure that their behaviour is honourable. Absence for long parts of the day without being in the company

of adults, whether family or neighbours, means escape from this scrutiny and might make them vulnerable to suspicions of dishonourable behaviour, whether baseless or not.

OUTLOOK

There are some special challenges in trying to understand Roma society and culture. For a start, Roma tend to live a segregated life, torn apart from majority society through generations and centuries of exclusion and suspicion. Consequently, few outsiders gain first-hand experience with Roma cultural practices. These remain hidden to most people, and thus they become the subject of speculation, fantasy, and pre-conception. While there is growing number of public displays and information sources on Roma traditions and customs, both in the form of published academic research and media reports and in the form of self-depiction by Roma associations, activists, and writers, direct and reliable information on Roma is still more difficult to access in the public domain than information on the dominant majority society of any individual country or region in Europe. At the same time, certain images of Roma continue to prevail in mainstream fiction, film, and folklore. For this reason, discussion of Roma culture seldom takes

place in a neutral and unbiased space. Most Europeans have some kind of association with the word ‘Gypsy’, based on images that are transmitted through mainstream cultural outlets of various kinds. The absence of a tradition of literacy and public institutions within Roma society confines Roma culture largely to the private domain of the home and closed communities and thus makes it inaccessible to outsiders unless they undertake a special effort to become acquainted with Roma and their way of life and values. In writing about Roma culture we are therefore challenged to do more than simply inform; we must also undo much of the process of accumulation of incorrect information based on hearsay, projection, and fantasy.

In the previous passages, the reader may have come across a description of certain Roma customs and values that provide the seed, when interpreted out of context, for some of prejudices that surround Roma in the eyes of the majority population of many countries. When discussing Roma, just like any other nation, it is clear that values, attitudes, and cultural practices are best

understood when examined in context, in the deeper meaning that they have to those practising them and in light of the manner in which such practices help maintain a community’s cohesion and sense of self-esteem. Roma culture is no different. It serves a purpose, namely the maintenance of the community and the family in its very core. At the same time we must always remember that Roma culture, like every other culture, is not static, but dynamic and subject to variation and change. Practically none of the practices or beliefs described in this text are the property of all Roma families and communities without exception. There are always different ways of doing things, and attitudes of individuals and communities evolve and are adjusted to changing realities and circumstances as well as to outside influences. Today more than ever before, Roma society is in a stage of transition, with new opportunities being sought by many of its members, especially but not exclusively those of the younger generation. Inevitably, social change leads to cultural change. The reality of Roma culture is therefore complex and multilayered.

RECOMMENDED READING: **Engebriksen, Ada. (2007)** *Exploring Gypsiness: Power, Exchange and Interdependence in a Transylvanian Village*. Berghahn books. | **Gay-y-Blasco, Paloma. (1999)** *Gypsies in Madrid: Sex, Gender and the Performance of Identity*. Berg Publishers. | **Marushiakova, Elena & Popov, Vesselin. (2001)** *Gypsies in the Ottoman Empire*. University of Hertfordshire Press. | **Matras, Yaron. (2002)** *Romani: A linguistic introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. | journal **Romani Studies** www.romanistudies.org | **Okely, Judith. (1983)** *The Traveller-Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. | **Stewart, Michael. (1997)** *The time of the Gypsies*. Oxford: Westview. | **Sutherland, Anne. (1975)** *Gypsies. The hidden Americans*. London: Tavistock. | **Matras, Yaron. (2004)** *The role of language in mystifying and de-mystifying Gypsy identity*. In: *The role of the Romanies*, edited by Saul, N. & Tebbut, S. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 53-78.