

## PECULIARITIES OF THE ROMANIES' WAY OF LIFE

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**Abstract.** *The basic characteristic of the Romanies is their nomadic way of life, their belief in magic and a specific way of dressing. The cultural gap is reflected in the culture of poverty. The Romanies are not only poverty-stricken in the economic sense but in the cultural as well. They all share a characteristic feeling of marginality and helplessness; they also share a powerful orientation toward the present (the survival strategy) as well as a small ability to put off the gratification. Very often the Romanies' way of life is characterized by the feeling of resignation and helplessness. It is evident that the Romanies are excluded beside being outside the main institutions of the global society. The culture of poverty takes on the power of culture since its main traits are the guide as well as the framework for action, thinking and acting. A view of life is different when taken from the palace than from the tent. Such a pattern as well as a way of life pass from one generation to another and thus the poverty culture is kept permanently alive.*

**Key Words:** *Nomadic Way of Life of the Romanies, Magic in Romanies, Romanies' Way of Dressing, Romanies' Culture of Poverty*

The Romanies' way of life is very specific. The Gypsies have accepted their official name, the Romanies, meaning "people." They still live as nomads (their way of life being nomadic), they go on long journeys or limit their travels to one particular area. Concerning their way of life, mentality and behavior patterns there are most diverse stereotypes, intolerance and forms of racial discrimination.

Describing the way of life of Gypsies-wanderers, Tihomir Đorđević notices that it is very simple. Stressing that many times he has visited Gypsies-Nomads he says that he has always been amazed to see "how they never grow tired of the sufferings this way of life assumes."<sup>1</sup>

There is a deeply-rooted opinion that the Romanies are, first of all, drifters who live on begging or petty thefts or are sometimes slaves that can be exploited till death as

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<sup>1</sup> Тихомир Ђорђевић, *Наши народни живот*, Book 3, Просвета, Belgrade, 1984, p. 45.

recorded in some stories from Hungary or Rumania.<sup>2</sup>

The basic characteristics of the Romanies is their *nomadic way of life*. Adventures and roamings are hardly ever undertaken by one Gypsy family; usually there are more of them. These families are not in any particular sort of friendship; on the other hand, they do not hate one another. They quarrel, but they still love to be together. "By their nomadic way of life, religious instability and belief in magic, promiscuity and the way of dressing, they have always been different from other racial and ethnic groups thus turning them against themselves".<sup>3</sup>

To a large extent they are set aside by an attitude taken by the people in whose neighborhood they live. The identity that the Romanies have managed to preserve cannot be found in their way of living or their houses or way of travel, speech, way of dressing or religious rites. "Above all the customs that differ from one group to another, from one country to another, the Romany has a wish to be a Romany in non-Romany company and to mark his peculiarity by his behavior. More than 'romanioussness' common to all members of the group, the Romanies are separated from the rest of the society by the *cultural gap* (D. K.) regardless of the country or place they find themselves in."<sup>4</sup>

The cultural gap is expressed in the culture of poverty. The Romanies are not poverty-stricken only in the economic sense, but in the cultural as well. The characteristic feeling they share is that of being pushed to the margins, of helplessness, of strong orientation towards the present (survival strategy) and a little possibility to put off gratification. Very often the Romanies' way of life is characterized by the sense of resignation and utter helplessness.

The Romanies' exclusion as well as their absence from the main institution of the global society are obvious. The culture of poverty takes on the power of culture since its traits are the guide as well as the framework for ways of behaving, thinking and acting. Different ideas spring from the palace than from the *čerga*. Such a pattern, that is, a way of life passes on from one generation to another and thus poverty is permanently kept alive.

Numerous research projects of the Romanies' way of life point to the fact that those who are responsible for social policy have completely forgotten about Romanies. In some schools the Romany children are made obliged to attend schools regularly while paying-off of the family aid is related to the child's success at school. But the Romany children school education has a lot of shortcomings, namely, they are deprived of some important assumptions of schooling which explains their low level of achievement. The Romany children come to school without any social and cultural background. In the cultural sense they are linguistically and cognitively deprived. It is not new to say that young Romanies show less and less will and interest in schooling. Many of them do not know how to read and write. Unemployed boys become TV consumers adoring violence offered by TV in enormous amounts. Girls are most often employed in households and care about their younger brothers and sisters. They rarely take part in activities by their associations and other organizations in the service of a wider community that they regard as an expression

<sup>2</sup> See Ж. Шармањ, *Премошћавање јаза у култури*, UNESCO Messenger, October, 1984, p. 12

<sup>3</sup> Ц. Костић, *Град и време*, Вук Караџић, 1982, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> Ж. Шармањ, *Ibidem*, p. 12.

of the dominant culture. Their level of aspiration is most often low and comes to the culture of the present. In their plans for future the young Romany boys state they wish to "get a driving licence" or "to travel" while the girls say they want to "leave their families and get married." These answers point to a still powerful influence of the tradition as well as the wish to preserve it "by family travel".<sup>5</sup>

Very important indicators of each way of life are *work, housing and family life*.

The Romanies do traditional jobs as well as seasonal ones. There are few of them who are full-time employed. The permanently-settled Romanies live in the so-called temporary and non-hygienic settlements on the fringes of great cities, on unsettled land or in poor quarters, in the waggons that stay there for good. Even when they are settled, they do not identify with their surroundings yet. "Moreover, not all of the settled Gypsies have identified with their Serbian surroundings. Many of them mark the transition from roaming to settlement. This can be best seen by their apartments. The Gypsies settled a long time ago have houses that are slightly or not at all different by their simplicity and poverty (not even by this at some places) from the surroundings they live in, while the houses of the permanently settled Gypsies are shacks and dugouts that they leave very often and later they build other houses either at the same place or at some other one they like better. On the basis of their houses man could almost surely say whether the Gypsy settlement was built recently or a long time ago.

Some conclusions can be made on the basis of the way of dressing and profession. While wanderers put on all sorts of clothes, that is, whatever they get on the road either by begging or working, the permanently settled Gypsies wear the same clothes as those in their environment. While the wanderers do their traditional trades as blacksmiths, players, beggars, horse-sellers, etc., those who settled a long time ago tend to drop these jobs especially in the countryside and instead they tend to do the same jobs as those in their surroundings".<sup>6</sup>

The traditional professions of the wandering Romanies were easier to do in the countryside. Nowadays the development of the means of transport suits more to those who are permanently settled. They live on meagre subsistence on the margins of the society and they consider their insecure existence as a loss of their collective and individual identity. Greater intolerance towards the Romanies in the cities can be explained by the narrowing of the space for their wanderings. Many cities reserve special areas for them. This "ghetto" approach makes it difficult for them to integrate with their surroundings as well as to escape from the culture of poverty. The existential troubles and a specific survival strategy force them most often to do those jobs that no one else in town wants to do.

The Romany families that moved to apartment houses in which a rent is rather high often lose their traditional social organization "since in a situation like this the clan cannot any longer provide for any control and a social function and thus it is no longer a means of identification. The traditional jobs are changing: it is, for instance, more and more difficult for the families to find sufficient space for collecting and storing old iron".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ж. Шармањ, Ibidem, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Т. Ђорђевић, Ibidem, p. 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Ж. Шармањ, Ibidem, p. 12.

The Romanies have a characteristic language or their own kind of speech different from all known and spread types of speech. It is even thought that the speech of some group was created under the tents; it is the Romanies who have created it. It was originally supposed to be a secret language of a group of people, a system of secret signs and codes unintelligible to other groups and communities.

At the beginning the Romanies' slang (*šatrovački*) tended towards more strict isolation and it became an unsurpassable and involitional barrier among people. Its characteristics are secret speech codes as a special way of communication providing for keeping things secret.<sup>8</sup>

*Swears* represent a characteristic of the Serbian and especially of the Romany way of life. People swear, among other things, because of their existential troubles, motivated or not. In communication swearing means an attempt to gain an advantage (in quarrels, for instance). This is the trait of the Dionysian pattern that refuses any kind of imposing limits on living. Sociologically speaking, swears are most often products of the marginal social reality or of the periphery of life. Those who swear because of some existential trouble spring from the Romanies' layer of the world that has lost the track of everyday living and instead leads some kind of a naked pseudo-life.

"The post-industrial societies, in their care about human rights offer a new picture though they are, at the same time, turned towards the past with nostalgia. In the society of plenty all kinds of extravagance are allowed starting from the life on the wheels or on the water up to a successful sale of ancient needleworks. In this way some Romany families have obtained the possibility to preserve their own way of life and their ancestors' profession or to start new traditions by, for instance, selling antiquities and carpets. Of course, the question can be asked if these are really old trades or maybe the jobs of the people who are alienated, torn from their roots or only another tourist attraction."<sup>9</sup>

Today there are more and more papers about the Romany way of life. This is due to the problems the minority groups are facing as well as due to predominant cultural pluralism. The interest in the past, the language and the status in general is evident. The Romanies' self-consciousness is getting more focused and at the international level there is an endless fight for their more legal status.

## SPECIFIČNOSTI NAČINA ŽIVOTA ROMA

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*Osnovna karakteristika Roma je njihov nomadski način življenja, verovanje u magiju i specifičan način odevanja. Kulturni jaz ogleda se u kulturi siromaštva. Romi nisu pogođeni siromaštvom samo u ekonomskom pogledu već i u kulturnom. Za njih je karakterističan osećaj marginalnosti, bespomoćnosti, snažna orijentacija na sadašnjost (strategija preživljavanja), mala sposobnost da se odloži zadovoljenje. Vrlo često, romski način života karakteriše osećaj razigniranosti i bespomoćnosti. Vidljivo je neuključivanje Roma i njihovo neučestvovanje u*

<sup>8</sup> See T. Sabljak, *Rječnik šatrovačkog govora*, Globus, Zagreb, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> M. Tomka: "Роми – занатлије Европе", UNESCO Messenger, October, 1984, p. 17.

*glavnim institucijama globalnog društva. Kultura siromaštva poprima snagu kulture, jer su njene osobine vodič i okvir za način postupanja, mišljenja i delovanja. Drugačije se misli iz palate nego iz čerge. Takav obrazac i način ponašanja prenosi se s generacije na generaciju i tako se trajno obnavlja siromaštvo.*

Ključne reči: *nomadski način življenja Roma, magija u Roma, odevanje Roma, kultura siromaštva Roma*