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ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL

RESEARCH ON ROMA

Roma in Hungary cannot be referred to as a uniform ethnic group. The impression of uniformity tends to be subscribed to by politicians, civil servants and the media, and it is the one commonly believed by ordinary members of the public. In reality, however, people who call themselves Roma tend to differentiate between at least three ethnic groups. Differences in native language define the three groups. Any ethnographic description of Roma has to take into consideration this fact. But differences between Roma groups based on occupations or livelihoods—as well as the associated differences in economic and social status—give rise to even greater complexity. Thus, ethnographers would be foolish to claim that “this is what Roma eat” or “this is what they wear.” They will be more accurate if they state: “the food and clothing of some successful Vlach Roma looks like this” or “the food and clothing of Hungarian Roma living in unemployment and poverty looks like that.” In this way, groups may be formed of local Roma communities on the basis of shared features or similar features. Under ideal conditions, the first step towards compiling an ethnographic description is to determine—within the given communities—the cultural norms and rules that characterize the community as a whole and then to describe the ideal forms of the given phenomena as professed to and practiced by the group. Phenomena differing from the average are adjusted to the mean. In the second step, the cultural norms of the various different groups are brought together. This creates group versions of the system of clothing and nutrition. Only by placing the group versions alongside one another is it possible to describe the clothing and nutritional characteristics of Roma.

It is extremely important to understand that a dual system of these phenomena exists. On the one hand, ethnography and anthropology establish and develop systems that are derived from making

observations of Roma. On the other hand, the Roma communities themselves also formulate systems of rules as part of their social functioning. A further question is the extent to which these cultural sub-systems—such as clothing and nutrition, but also weddings, burials and, more generally, the whole system of customs relating to individuals within the community or to the community as a whole—are explained, at the ideological level, by ethnic factors and the extent to which they are bound to the framework deemed characteristic of the community. In other words, what we are asking is whether “the inhabitants of Tyukod” do something in such and such a way or “the Roma inhabitants of Tyukod” do this or that, thereby distinguishing themselves from the peasants farmers of Tyukod, or whether as Roma they do something in such a manner, thereby distinguishing themselves from the *gadzo*.

The classification of Roma that enjoys wide acceptance even today was first proposed by Kamill Erdős in 1958. There were, however, attempts prior to this—attempts that have also served to influence political and administrative practices over the years. The census of 1893 considered migration and settlement to be the yardstick of development. It therefore distinguished between wandering Roma, Roma who were temporary residents somewhere, and permanently settled Roma. The idea of two extreme types of Roma stuck. For instance, two decades later, in a work entitled *Cigány a magyar irodalomban* [Roma in Hungarian Literature], Gyula Fleischmann mentioned, in the introduction to his work, the following two categories:

We should distinguish between two types of Roma: 1. Wandering Roma 2. Settled Roma. There are important differences between the two groups. The real ancient Roma traits comprising the essential features of the race, are found in wandering Roma. Pride, melancholy reminiscent of the Indus race, reticence with regard to strangers, an attraction to the vagrant life, and a love of nature—all of these characteristics are now to be found only in wandering Roma. Owing to their self-

reliant lifestyles, they have been able to preserve a greater number of the racial traits than have sedentarized Roma living in servitude. Wandering Roma look down upon their degenerate and debased brothers, the sedentarized Roma, seeing in them mere pariahs who have fallen into slavery and who are unworthy of the name of the great Roma nation.

In this context, however, it is the ethnographic and culturological observation (rather than the political) that is dominant, even if it is tangibly a somewhat romantic attitude. The emphasis laid on wandering Roma is a continuation of Mihály Zámolyi Varga's romantic ethnography of tent-dwelling Roma. The work of the researchers who become known as the "Romologist triad"—Henrik Wlislöcki, Archduke Joseph of Austria, and Antal Hermann—was not free of romantic attitudes. Although the three researchers "employed" the participant observation method, in the course of which they characterised Roma as people who disliked social ties, who were reluctant to join with the rest of society, and who were nature's children and not entirely honest. Their academic interest in Roma was driven by a kind of enlightened absolutism: they "devoted their efforts" to the sedentarization of wandering Roma. Archduke Joseph wanted to settle a group of wandering Roma on his estate in the village of Alcsut, while Antal Hermann sought, as chief counsel at the Ministry of Interior, to prepare for and co-ordinate the ministerial decree of 1916. These men apparently had little understanding of the culture of the wandering Roma. They acknowledged neither the economic necessity of nomadism nor the distrust and suspicion encountered by Roma. The long appendix in the *Pallas Nagylexikon* entitled "czigány" may be regarded as a summary of the work of the three authors.

An article by Antal Heiczinger published in 1939 was one of the first to describe the three groups of Roma in Hungary, giving equal recognition to trough-making Roma. In a work entitled "Data

relating to the Roma question in the village,” the language, migration, occupation and livelihood, lifestyle and relations towards the village and towards peasant farmers are employed as observation criteria. In a series of essays entitled “Roma of Békés County—Roma dialects in Hungary” and “Roma in Hungary—tribes and clans,” Kamill Erdős attempted a classification of groups in Hungary that were referred to as Roma. Even today his classification is the most detailed available. It has also served to codify areas of academic study concerned with Roma, providing the terms of expressions for ethnographic and anthropological inquiry. Moreover, in its fundamental categories, it has served to influence subsequent sociological research.

Two types of Roma may be distinguished in Hungary:

- A) *Romani-speaking Roma*
- B) *Non-Romani-speaking Roma*

The first group may be divided into two very distinct groups:

- A1) *Speakers of the so-called Carpathian dialect of Romani*
- A2) *Speakers of the so-called Vlach (Vlax) dialect of Romani*

The A1) group may be divided into three sub-groups:

- a) *Nógrád County*
- b) *Budapest region (Páty, Csobánka, Pomáz, Zsám-bék, Pilisvörösvár, Bia, Pesthidegkút, Budakalász) and the Transdanubian region (Pécs, Mohács, Versend, Dunaszekcső)*
- c) *Knife-grinder and carousel Roma (migrating throughout the country and calling themselves “German” or “Vend”—i.e. Slovenian—Roma)*

The dialect spoken by Vlach Roma living in Nógrád County is different from that spoken by other Vlach Roma in Hungary.

Carpathian Roma and Vlach Roma are unable to com-

municate with each other in Romani, because of the great difference between their respective dialects.

Vlach Roma (A2) are divided into several tribes (types), and within these tribes there are numerous clans. Their tribal names indicate their occupations, while their clan-names stem from the names of their forefathers or some esteemed predecessor (sometimes even a nickname) or from the name of the place where the clan first settled down (toponym). The names of tribes and clans sometimes go back centuries, but sometimes they are only a few decades old.

The types of Vlach (Vlax) Roma are as follows: a) Lovari (horse-traders; horse-dealers); b) Posot'ari (pick-pockets); c) Kherari (casual laborers, house-owners); d) Colari (carpet dealers); e) Kelderari (copper-smiths, kettle-menders); f) Cerhari ("tent-dwellers"); g) Mašari ("fishermen"); h) Bugari; i) Ęurari ("knife-grinders"); j) Drizar ("robbers"); k) Gurvar (fodozovo) (dish-makers, cutlery-menders).

The main Vlach (Vlax) Roma clans are as follows: Hercegešt'e (from the village of Hercegszölös), Ęokešt'e, Kodešt'e, Ducešt'e, Dudmešt'e, Pirancešt'e, Migurešt'e, Sosoješt'e, Ęiriklái (meaning: bird), Ruva (meaning: wolf), Markulešt'e, Notari, Nemeka (forefather: from the name Voivode Neneka), Bužešt'e, Trandešt'e, Ęampašošt'e (from a nickname), Kozak, Kolompar, Stojka, Rafael, etc.

The second main group of Roma comprises the non-Romani native speakers. They are divided into two sub-groups:

B1 group comprises Hungarian native speakers;

B2 group comprises Romanian native speakers.

The B1 group (Romungro, "Rumungro") are the descendants of Carpathian and Vlach (Vlax) Roma whose ancestors did not teach their children Romani—probably hoping that

this would facilitate their assimilation into Hungarian society. It is now almost impossible to distinguish between the Carpathian and Vlach elements.

They are sub-divided into two sub-groups:

- a) musicians (“gentlemen” group)*
- b) adobe-makers, basket-weavers, casual laborers, etc. (poorer group)*

The B2 group is also divided into two sub-groups:

- 1) Romanian Roma (e.g. in the communities of Elek and Méhkerék in Békés County)*
- 2) Trough-making Roma.*

The Romanian Roma have no sub-groups. Three types of trough-making Roma live in Hungary:

- a) “Roma from the region behind the Tisza” [tisza-háti cigányok]: mainly in the Nyírség region; they have neglected their native language and tend increasingly to speak Hungarian;*
- b) “Smoky Roma” [füstös cigányok]: constitute the transition; live in Füzesabony, Békéscsaba and Tiszafüred;*
- c) “Danube Roma” [dunás cigányok]: live in Transdanubia; many of the men have shoulder-length hair, while the women wear necklaces of tiny seashells and pearls.*

The classification system now used by analysts is far simpler than the extraordinarily complex system proposed by Kamill Erdős. Today, the following groups tend to be mentioned: A2 (Vlach Roma), B1 (Hungarian native speakers), B2.1 (Romanian native speakers), and sometimes A1.c (Slovenian Roma). Kamill Erdős was careful to differentiate between the various groups. When making descriptions, he always referred to just one of the groups and never claimed that his findings would be valid for other groups.

Having overcome the difficulties of classifying the various

Roma groups, ethnographers showed varying amounts of interest in compiling descriptions of Roma. In terms of attitudes and issues, research undertaken in the 1950s represented a continuation of the efforts of the 1930s. The interest was manifest in two areas. On the one hand, researchers were inquisitive about traditional crafts; on the other, they wished to understand folkloristic elements. Their positivist descriptions of traditional or ancient crafts, the collection of objects in museums, and photographic documentation, have enriched our knowledge of Roma (descriptions of Roma troupe-makers were made by Béla Gunda, Margit Békeffy, Tivadar Petercsák and János Bencsik, and descriptions of iron-workers by Ferenc Bakó, Kamill Erdős, Ferenc Bodgál, Ilona Ladvenicza and Zsuzsa Bódi; moreover, the analyses also included adobe-making, brick-baking, rag-weaving, basket-weaving). However, such works are limited to learning about crafts; they are not embedded in the history of the community as a whole or in the community's real framework of relationships. Thus, rather than record real social historical processes, the descriptions tend to relate to the history of technology.

Folkloristic research efforts were initially motivated by the fact that Roma had adopted elements of Hungarian folk culture and continued to exhibit them. The researchers assumed that Roma did not possess their own ethnic culture but, as archaic communities, had preserved numerous cultural elements adopted from Hungarian dance folklore and folktales. Thus, the purpose of research was not to describe Roma culture, but to gain insights into archaic systems of Hungarian folk culture. Emphasis on the co-existence of Roma with non-Roma gave legitimacy to the idea that the Roma culture was exclusively the result of the adoption of elements from Hungarian culture. There is no denying that folklore knowledge is to be considered dependent upon social class or status, but one should not ignore the ethnic knowledge that arises during the formulation of group identity. Folklore researchers concentrated on

collecting folktales, so that the articles published by the Romology Section of the Ethnographic Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences contained collections of folktales, but mention should also be made of the work of Olga Nagy and József Vekkerdi.

A very different approach was employed by Katalin Kovalcsik, who, in the course of folklore research, concentrated on a given community rather than on the surviving elements of a specific genre. Her research thus sought to describe the folklore system of specific communities. In contrast to the two other schools of thought, Károly Bari formulated, in his summary work, an attempt to construct the formerly homogenous Roma folklore knowledge by means of the folklore artefacts surrounding Roma.

In recent decades, folkloristic interest has spread to the traditional beliefs of Roma and to several elements of traditional customs such as the subsystems relating to birth, death and mourning, and to describing curses and oaths. The studies of Kamill Erdős represent an example of such interest. As far as the specificity of the description, we should distinguish between the works of Melinda Rézmûves, Gusztáv Balázs and Julianna László Kalányosné on the one hand, who relate specific findings in the field to specific communities, and the works of György Rostás-Farkas, Ervin Karsai and Pál Farkas on the other, who tend to take their own experiences of Vlach Roma communities and generalize them for Roma as a whole. They are also the ones who attempted to compile a Roma ethnography in their synthesizing work. The scholarly value of their attempt is diminished by their failure to include references and their rather romantic portrayal of Roma.

The “second triad” of scholars comprises Kamill Erdős, József Vekkerdi and András Hajdú. From our point of view, the first two of these researchers had the greatest influence on subsequent ethnographic research. The similarity of their approaches is perhaps best

demonstrated by the fact that both of them believed that Roma could be persuaded to abandon “their outdated lifestyle.” Researchers continue to cite the works of Kamill Erdős, but József Vekerdi is now a discredited figure. In his latter works—as a philosophical comment on cultural theory—Vekerdi even stated that an independent Roma culture did not exist, as its development had been prevented by a lack of traditions, and that Roma “were characterized by material and spiritual simplicity.”

The first major synthetic work of recent decades was edited by László Szegő and published in 1983 as *Cigányok, honnét jöttök—merre tartanak* [Roma, where did You Come from and where Are You Going?]. The book includes a variety of texts with differing approaches, including scholarly analyses as well as other texts urging the integration and upward mobility of Roma. In recent decades, several researchers have attempted to publish monographs or collected essays on Roma customs (e.g. Zsuzsa Bódi, Tibor Tuza, Elemér Várnagy and Katalin Kovalcsik and Anna Csongor). Another possible name on the list is Géza Csemer, who argues in his book *Habiszti* against over-politicizing Roma culture.

In summary, we may state that in recent decades ethnographic and folkloristic researchers have tended to concentrate on Vlach Roma—who are considered to be traditional Roma—and have been limited to describing an archaic phenomenon. They have tended not to regard the community or group as the point of departure and have usually ignored modern-day processes. Thus, it is no accident that the ethnographic notes in manuals and other educational material are often archaic and usually describe the cultural phenomena of Vlach Roma as if they were typical of Roma culture in general.

Perhaps the most accurate descriptions and analyses of the cultural systems of the various Roma groups are to be found in social anthropological works. Under this approach, researchers investigate the culture of Roma groups as an existing culture whose prin-

cial purpose is to organize community life and to promote the existence of the group. It is not possible to describe the culture in itself, but only in its relationship with majority society. Of such anthropological researchers, Michael Stewart, a British researcher, has produced the most significant work.

The fieldwork undertaken by Michael Stewart among Roma in Hungary in the 1980s as well as his published findings opened up new horizons in our knowledge of Roma, because Stewart used methods that were quite different from the ethnographic approach. Stewart intentionally selected a Vlach Roma group, because he supposed that they would have preserved a greater number of independent elements in their cultural system and would have tried harder to preserve traditional values and lifestyle. While compiling the description of Vlach Roma, Stewart also examined their relationships with peasants and other Roma groups. In this way, he was able to unravel something that scholarly research and governments had muddled over for years. Stewart also succeeded in revealing something that public opinion often passes judgment upon without understanding the situation. Stewart drew a line between Vlach Roma with traditional lifestyles and aspirations that differed from mainstream society and from its value-system on the one hand, and Hungarian Roma with lifestyles and aspirations that attempted to accommodate the values of society.

Research of an anthropological nature was subsequently carried out by Gábor Fleck and Tünde Virágh in Beás communities and by Viktória Burka in Hungarian Roma communities.

One should mention two further cultural historical works that may assist readers in acquiring further knowledge. A work entitled *A magyarországi cigánykutatások története* [History of Research on Roma in Hungary] by József Vekerdi covers many different areas of scholarly study, while Csaba Prónai's work entitled *Cigánykutatás és kulturális antropológia* [Roma Research and Cultural Anthropology] evaluates, primarily in terms of cultural

anthropology, international and Hungarian research projects of the past and present.