

THE SELF-DEFINITIONS OF ROMA ETHNIC GROUPS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER ROMA GROUPS

Here we have reached the point where, approaching from the folk culture of the groups in Hungary that are referred to as Roma, we may examine the classification of the groups and their relationship with one another, including their opinions of other Roma groups. We have already noted that it is possible to register, as a general trend among the groups, a desire to be separate and distinctive. Indeed, almost all the groups referred to as Roma seek to clearly distinguish themselves from other groups referred to as Roma, often rejecting any comparison with the other groups.

People in Hungary who are referred to in the scholarly literature as Vlach Roma [*oláh cigányok*] tend to call themselves *Rom* or *Roma*. The so-called Hungarian Roma [*magyar cigányok*] tend to call themselves “musicians” [*muzsikusok*], while the Romanian Roma [*román cigányok*] usually call themselves *Beás* [*beások*]. Of course, one should not assume these three groups must always constitute the basis for any classification, but there is no denying that the various groups do usually place themselves in one of these three main groups. At the same time, Roma placing themselves in one of the main groups do not necessarily accept all other Roma placing themselves in the same main group. In other words, some Roma who declare membership of a group are not regarded as belonging to the group by others in the same group.

In the late 1980s, Hungarian intellectuals who were favorably disposed towards Roma began using the word *roma* instead of *cigány* when referring to anybody who was considered to be Roma,

because they felt that *cigány* and other related words were pejorative or insulting. However, the “musicians” [*muzsikusok*] protested against the use of the term *roma*, claiming that they were not Roma but Musician Roma [*muzsikus cigányok*]. Nevertheless, most Hungarian-speaking Roma politicians were willing to use the term Roma when referring to the civil society and political organizations of Roma people, such as the Roma Parliament [*Roma Parlament*], Roma Civil Rights Foundation [*Roma Polgárjogi Alapítvány*], Roma Press Centre [*Roma Sajtóközpont*], Roma Veritas [*Roma Veritas*], while other bodies received names in the Romani language: *Phralipe*, *Amaro Drom*, *Lungo Drom*, and *Romano Kher*. These facts indicate that at the level of “Roma politics” the various groups’ unity and cultural and social integration has been established—although this does not mean that such unity is universally recognized at the level of everyday culture. Even in today’s “journalese,” the term Roma has won legitimacy, although it can be a euphemism or an accommodation with the spoken language. Often interpretations about Roma merely devalue the term.

A crucial sociological fact is that there exists between the three main groups a firm boundary in terms of marriage. The groups are endogamous, and even within the three main groups there are endogamous subgroups. This means that individuals belonging to a certain group can only marry within the group. Within groups calling themselves Musicians or Rom, there are firm boundary lines. These subgroups can be based on occupations, lifestyle, material wealth or geography, but they may also derive from the clan or kinship systems. Another trenchant expression of social segregation is residential segregation, when people belonging to two or three of the main groups reside in different parts of the village and do not “mix” or where in a given village there is a Roma settlement, within such a settlement one can observe a dividing line, an imaginary boundary. Segregation of the main groups can also be seen in the field of employment. In earlier decades, people belonging to dif-

ferent groups formed separate work-brigades, and they tended to ask for separate quarters at workers' hostels. The same could be observed in respect of general social relations (such as friendship, "bonding" within the same age group). All this serves to demonstrate that whereas society at large classifies anybody referred to as Roma in one uniform group, Roma themselves express their differences and their belonging to one of the groups through symbolic means.

We can observe such efforts in the linguistic separation of the groups referred to as Roma. The terminology of the groups referred to as Vlach Roma classifies people or groups as follows. Members of our group are Roma. People opposed to our group are "gadzo," which can be further divided into peasants and nobles (generally speaking, those opposed to the group with hostile sentiments are called peasants, while those who show solidarity with the group are called nobles). The category inbetween are called Romungro, a term that implies that they are neither Roma nor Hungarian. Hungarian Roma divide the world up in a similar manner, calling their own group "musicians, and calling Vlach Roma those people defined as Vlach Roma in the scholarly literature. Like the Vlach Roma, Hungarian Roma call non-Roma "gadzo"—a word derived from Romani.

If we take some local groups or communities as our point of departure, we see that the classification of Roma is unclear and contradictory. In a work entitled *A magyarországi cigányok helyzetéről* [On the Situation of Roma in Hungary], György Pogány and Géza Bán cite a categorization given by a Roma person living in Salgótarján:

Roma living in Hungary comprise six groups: a) tent-dwelling itinerant Vlach Roma; b) trough-making Roma; c) carpet-makers and trading Roma; d) rural casual workers who are also basic musicians; e) provincial urban and Budapest urban dwellers, working in industry but with a casual attitude and

nature; f) musicians living in provincial urban and Budapest urban areas, who are more greatly esteemed as musicians. It is important that we consider within the various groups and categories the greatest level of development.

This classification evidently makes simultaneous use of ethnic, occupational and settlement factors. Members of a Romani-speaking group in Szalkaszentmárton think that Roma can be divided into Romungro (“musicians”), Vlach Roma, tent-dwelling Roma, hovel-dwelling Roma, knife-grinders, and trough-makers. They then divide the Vlach Roma into further subgroups—Lovari, Pantestyu, Kudestyi, Sosoyi, and Hodestyu; in other words, they mix up and regard as identical groups defined in Kamill Erdős’s terminology as tribes and clans. When asked to define themselves, they state definitively that they are Lovari, irrespective of which tribes or clans their ancestors belonged to. Hungarian-speaking Roma in Nagycserkesz note the existence of the following groups: Vlach Roma, tent-dwelling Roma, trough-makers, “musicians,” and Hungarian Roma. Hungarian-speaking Roma in Tarnalelesz mention the following: “musicians,” adobe-makers, Vlach Roma, Lovari, and trough-makers. Romani-speaking Roma in Ároktő distinguish between Vlach Roma, Gurvari, tent-dwelling Roma, Romungro, and trough-makers. Romani-speaking Roma in Kétegyház call all Hungarian-speaking Roma Romungro; they then distinguish between Beás and Vlach Roma, including groups such as Mashari, Lovari, Kelderash and Churari. Romanian-speaking Roma in Véménd use the names Kolompár or Lakatár for Vlach Roma; they also distinguish Hungarian Roma, and divide the Romanian-speaking Roma into three distinct groups: Beás (or *árgyelán*), *tincsán* and *muncsán*. Lakatari are then subdivided into the following groups based on employment: *kisiris* (knife-grinders), *abrosár* (peddlers of textiles), *bokráncsos* (cutlers) and *kupec*. Other *muncsán* groups call themselves *cigán* and refer to

Beás as *árgyelán*. The Beás themselves recognize just two distinct groups: *árgyelán* and *muncsán*.

Among Romani-speaking groups, one may observe a process of increasing unity. Lovari has gradually become the self-designation of groups whose ancestors belonged to other tribes or clans. The former tribal and occupational designations have practically disappeared, because the traditional forms of employment no longer exist and there is increasing uniformity in terms of livelihoods. Special Roma occupations such as horse-trading and other forms of business have become popular among increasing numbers of Romani-speaking groups, who were not necessarily active in such fields previously. In earlier periods, Lovari (i.e. “those with money”) were considered to be at the top end of the Romani-speaking Roma hierarchy, so that other Roma who became involved in similar work chose to be called Lovari too. The “original Lovari” also use this self-designation, but they try to exclude other Romani-speaking groups that are poor, live in segregated Roma settlements, or are not involved in business. Thus, the term Lovari has come to mean indirectly “real Roma”—Roma who are merchants and businessmen or who trade in horses, automobiles or non-ferrous metals.

Among Romani-speaking groups, the determining factors are social status and social function. A real Rom is not dependent upon the hierarchical system of the social division of labor; he seeks to be his own boss. This is true despite the fact that his activities are dependent upon his connections with peasants and the rest of society. That is to say, real Roma make a living by purchasing goods from peasants and other producers and then by selling them. In this regard, beneficial and successful business deals constitute the supreme value, because they will ensure independence from the majority and from the institutions of the majority. At the same time, the visible expression of a person’s wealth serves as a symbol of the real Rom. Thus, he will accumulate and show visible items of wealth and live “the good life.” Romani-speaking

Roma communities that are unable to fulfill such expectations are not regarded as real Rom, even though “they speak the language” and see the purpose in life in entertainment, in mutual self-respect, and in nurturing relationships with family and friends. One of the status groups manages to accomplish all these expectations, while the other is capable of realizing just one element of the system.

We observe a similar phenomenon among the Hungarian-speaking Roma ethnic group. Almost without exception, Hungarian Roma define themselves as “musicians,” irrespective of whether they or their immediate ancestors made a living from music. Consequently, “musician” [*muzsikus*] is the self-designation used by people whose forebears were adobe-makers, day laborers or—more recently—agricultural or industrial workers. However, in their view, “musician” denotes their original ancestry, because the common mythical ancestor was a musician. Moreover, it is a group name that can be applied to all Hungarian-speaking Roma, thereby distinguishing them from Vlach Roma or trough-making Roma. Those Roma who consider themselves to be real musicians naturally reject this usage and try to limit the meaning by emphasizing the principle that “all musicians [*muzsikusok*] are Hungarian Roma [*magyar cigányok*], but not all Hungarian Roma are musicians.” Real musician Roma consider the “good life” to be something like that of the “genuine artist” or, nurtured by an earlier idea, close to the “gentry ideal.” Thus, the real musician is respectful of others, generous, hospitable and charitable, thereby achieving symbolic superiority. Although the musician is dependent for his livelihood upon peasants and guests, his values are not identical to theirs. He seeks to express the good life by means of the material world, but he tends to consume rather than accumulate goods. Since his livelihood is based on making music (that is, providing a service), he does not attempt to achieve “enhanced reproduction” as do Roma merchants and businessmen.

For groups of Hungarian Roma defining themselves as “musicians” but not making a livelihood from music, peasant and lower middle-class values have been the desired norm in recent decades, despite the attraction of the (unattainable) status of the real Roma musicians. Security—employment, the family, and the security of the family—has become the purpose of life. The perceived objective was the partial or limited independence of the peasant or worker lifestyle. In previous decades, industrial work or even full-time work in agriculture provided the basic livelihood. A general aim for members of this group was to define themselves first and foremost as Hungarian citizens rather than refer to their “Roma descent.” Roma living in isolated and segregated settlements wished to move to villages and towns and live among non-Roma, and they were offended when others called them Roma [*cigány*]. Despite all their efforts, they did not succeed in moving to prosperous villages to live among the non-Roma. Everywhere they were forced to face the social consequences of their ethnic background. Nevertheless, there was general acceptance of the government and administrative policies of assimilation. Moreover, members of these groups blamed Vlach Roma for the prejudices they faced.

We know now that the assimilation attempts of Hungarian-speaking Roma were only partially successful. From the latter half of the 1980s, many Roma—above all unskilled workers and laborers—became unemployed and lost their stable and secure livelihoods. Many Roma who had already attained a lower middle-class quality of life, were forced once again into casual work and insecure livelihoods. Cultural forms typical of the culture of poverty arose. During this period, business and enterprise offered the securest form of livelihood—as the many examples of Vlach Roma livelihood strategies demonstrate. Even in communities where the men used to work in industry or in agriculture, buying and selling and street-vending became possible livelihood solutions. In recent

years, there has been a fusion between the two groups, based on the cultural system of the commercial “business” occupations. The category of adapters has been pushed into the background, despite the fact that, in comparison with previous decades, a greater number of groups have realized the consolidated peasant farmer/middle-class way of life required by the state, such as, for instance, rural Roma employing peasant practices in agricultural production.

The various Roma ethno-linguistic groups—although the various sub-groups almost amount to “life-style groups” or even “academic concepts”—continue to maintain inter-group rivalry and attempt to assign a place to the various ethnic groups within the Roma hierarchical system. A hierarchy accepted by all does not exist. A possible universal observation is that the Romanian-speaking Beás sub-groups feel that both the Hungarian Roma and the Vlach Roma look down upon them, isolating them to the point of exclusion. Yet at the same time, Beás also believe that they possess the greatest intellectual abilities: for instance, they have established a grammar school in Pécs—the Gandhi Grammar School. The Vlach Roma—especially those who have become self-reliant economically and consider themselves to be rich—place themselves at the top of the hierarchy. They are rather contemptuous of what they call the Romungro, including “musicians”—whom they refer to as “five hundred *Forints* people,” who earn just enough money from music to live from day to day. They consider Roma with permanent jobs or making a living as peasant farmers to be slave-like people working in drudgery. They do not regard such people as real Roma. This is not because they don’t speak Romani, but because they don’t live the Roma life and tend to copy the lifestyle of the *gadzo*. Nevertheless, some of the poorer, more destitute Romani-speaking groups think that the most distinguished Roma are the “gentleman” Roma, the musicians—but only those who really are musicians.

The musicians—the real musicians—place themselves at the top of the hierarchy. They are proud that they are able to popularize Hungarian music (which in their view is really Roma music),

thereby enhancing the reputation of the country. Defining themselves as Hungarian citizens and as being placed high up on Hungary's social hierarchy, they consider themselves to be "esteemed members of society" because they conform to the values of society. They blame the Vlach Roma for anti-Roma prejudice, arguing that the rich ones have doubtless acquired their wealth by criminal and dishonest means. The prejudice against them is thus justified. Meanwhile, the poor ones—who are themselves to blame for their poverty—live outdated lifestyles, thereby discrediting the musicians, because society tends to generalize about Roma. People's judgments of Vlach Roma may be transposed on to them, thereby preventing their integration into society.

The Romani-speaking groups distinguish themselves from the Hungarian-speaking groups because they think that the latter have abandoned their ancient Roma culture, seek to adapt to the cultural norms of the majority, and are determined to assimilate into society. They fear that they will be identified with an ethnic group whose group identity they do not profess, because for them one of the most important elements of a purposeful life is to live as a Roma and to maintain the Roma characteristics of their culture. This difference in view gave rise to the debate concerning which Roma group has an authentic cultural system. As far as anthropology is concerned, the question is clearly a pointless one, because a cultural system is always a changing and developing structure. Our description of the cultural system of the Hungarian-speaking groups cannot be so profound as our description of the cultural system of the Romani-speaking groups, because previous researchers have tended to assume the greater originality of the culture of the Romani-speaking communities and have thus spent less time on describing the culture of the Hungarian-speaking groups. (In other words, descriptions such as those of Kamill Erdős and Michael Stewart are not available for the Hungarian-speaking groups.) In our experience, however, Hungarian-speaking Roma communities do consider their own cultural system to be a part of Roma culture.

Perhaps it is not simply a phantasmagoria to hypothesize that the conflicts between the various groups could be resolved if researchers would consider the cultural systems of the Roma ethnic groups to be equivalent and if the findings of research would be better applied, enhancing knowledge of Roma both among politicians and members of the general public. If the classification and internal value systems of Roma groups were better known, then they might face less ignorance and prejudice in everyday life. They would prevent the boundaries between the various groups from becoming more rigid, and this would increase the degree of solidarity within the community. Although the intellectual representatives of Hungary's Roma ethnic groups are working to achieve their cultural integration, nevertheless at the level of popular culture one may perceive "trench warfare" between the various groups.