Development of Romani culture

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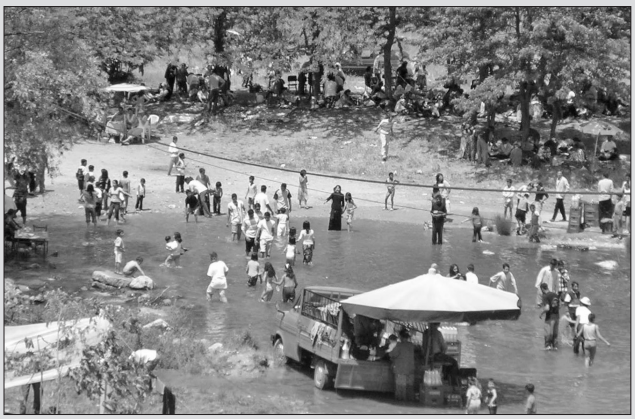
The ethnic culture of the Roma living in the countries of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe (also found as migrants in western Europe) has formed and developed through a long and complex process of continuous active interaction with the culture of their surrounding population.

Due to the internal heterogeneity of the Romani communities and the fact that they live scattered among the surrounding population in different countries and in different cultural and historic regions, the result is the presence of many diverse subvariants of the invariant Romani culture.

This shall, however, not affect the overall conclusion about Romani culture, which constitutes a separate ethnic variation of European culture. It is equal to those of all other European nations, and as such is just as unique and special as any of them.



Ill. 1 Celebration of *Kakava,* Edirne 2005

Ill. 2 Celebration of *Kakava,* Edirne 2005

Ill. 3 Celebration of *Kakava,* Kırklareli 2004

Ill. 4 Wedding in Baltëz among Mečkara Gypsies in Albania, 1999

(unless otherwise stated, all photos: Archive Studii Romani)

The Romani culture is a part of the common European cultural tradition. After the resettlement of Romani communities from Europe to other parts of the world, new interaction came into being and additional characteristics are superimposed, thus as a result one can see a new subvariant of the invariant.

STARTING POSITIONS

When talking about the culture of the Roma, the main problem appears to be tackling the established stereotypes which have existed for centuries. This does not only refer to widespread public prejudices (e.g. the legend about "Gypsies" stealing small children) whose roots lie in the Middle Ages with the appearance of the so-called "Gypsies" (*Zigeuner, Bohemians, Tsiganes, Zingari, Gitanos*, etc.) in western Europe. It also superimposed new patterns with positive connotations, such as the "Gypsies" free lifestyle, not limited by any social norms which were established during the Age of Romanticism. There are, however, many stereotypes about "Gypsies" in academic research as well, which still continue to have a negative impact on the understanding and public presentation of Romani culture.

The presentation of the ethnic culture of the Roma living in the countries of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe (and also of those having migrated to western Europe past and recent decades too), inevitably should be done through comparison and critical contrast to certain firmly established concepts about Romani culture found in numerous academic studies and opposing the dominant idea of its exclusive exotic and unique character.

It must be stressed that this analysis aims to give an answer to the key question whether there actually is a single Romani culture. It will consider the basic characteristics and peculiarities of the culture of individual Romani groups and/or of Roma in certain countries or in a given cultural-historical region.

Ill. 5 Gypsies on picnic in Istanbul (19th century)-postcard

Ill. 6 Gypsy nomads black smiths near Istanbul (19th century)-postcard

WAY OF LIFE

Since the beginning of "Gypsy" or rather Romani studies the nomadic way of life is considered to be the structural and defining characteristic of their culture. The presence of millions of Roma living a settled way of life in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe for centuries is explained by the past repressive measures exercised by the governments of the countries in these regions (especially during the communist era) through which the Roma were forced to abandon their "natural" way of life.

Historical data on the Roma in these regions, however, tell a completely different story. The first reliable historical evidence for the presence of Roma in the Balkans clearly shows that the ancestors of today's Roma did not only lead a nomadic, but also a sedentary way of life, while only data about the settled way of life prevail. In 1384 for example, *Romniti* lived in huts near the walls of the city of Modon (today's Methoni) in the Peloponnese. By 1483 their group already comprised 300 families who were engaged in the manufacturing of iron products. Even on the island of Corfu a special *Feodum Atsiganorum* was founded in 1375 which included Roma making a living from blacksmithing, caldron making and agriculture.

The *Egyptians* [i.e. "Gypsies"] are repeatedly mentioned in the city registers of Dubrovnik, Zagreb and Ljubljana in the period from 1362 to 1397. Their occupations included artisans, craftsmen, small traders and musicians. In the Ottoman Empire the *kıpti* [i.e. "Gypsies"] are for the first time mentioned in the tax register of *Nikopol Sancak* (a territorial-administrative unit) as early as 1430, with registered occupations in agriculture (which proves a sedentary lifestyle). Over the centuries, according to tax records of the Ottoman Empire, the ratio between the Roma living sedentarily and nomadic Roma (semi-nomads to be more precise, as they owned or rented houses

Ill. 7 Gypsy nomads in Bulgaria, 50ies of 20th century, Archive EIM (Ethnographic Institute and Museum)

ROMANI NOMADS IN THE 1950 AND 1960

Country	Romani nomads
Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia	> 5 %
Hungary, Yugoslavia, Albania	> 1/4
Romania	> 1/3
USSR	> 2/3
Poland	< 3/4

(during sedentarisation)

Ill. 8

in winter) changed, but was dominated by sedentary living and over time, their share has constantly increased.

The situation was similar in the principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, where for centuries (from the 14th until the mid 19th century) the Roma were slaves (of the prince, of the monasteries and of the boyars). The exact ratio between sedentary slaves (from the category *vatraşi*), who were in general engaged in agricultural work for the mansions of the boyars and monasteries, and city craftsmen on the one hand, and slaves of the prince, leading a nomadic way of life on the other hand changed over the years but the proportion of the sedentary living Roma remains higher.

During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the proportion of Romani inhabitants with a settled way of life sharply increased after the reforms of Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Joseph II in the second half of the 18th century. A special census of the Empire's Romani population held in 1893 reported a predominance of sedentary *Zigeuner, Cigányok*.

The situation in the Russian Empire was different, as there were no state measures which aimed at a forced settling цыгане. However, on the eve of the October Revolution in 1917, a significant part of Roma had already settled in the towns of the Empire (as musicians, merchants, petty artisans and craftsmen), while others lived in villages (in certain regions of the Empire, the majority of them in the Smolensk region) and made their living from agriculture.

The processes of transition from a nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life of the Roma to a sedentary one in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe stepped up again in the 1920s and 1930s. After World War II, communist regimes in the countries in these regions adopted an active policy of forced settlement of Romani nomads. Their number, however, was not very high and in some countries was indeed negligible. As shown in the table, itinerant Roma prevailed in the Soviet Union and Poland, over 3/4 of the Roma in Poland and at least 2/3 of the total Romani population in the Soviet Union were nomads. At the other end of the spectrum were Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, where itinerant Roma subject to government policy were fewer than 5% of the total Romani population. In the rest of the countries the relative share of nomadic Roma varied between these two extremes. In Romania and Yugoslavia the proportion of itinerant Roma was less than 1/3, and in Hungary and Albania less than 1/4 of the total.

Despite policies intended for Roma to completely break with their nomadic traditions, some Romani groups managed to preserve their semi-nomadic way of life until today (with a nomadic season in the warm period of the year while staying at their own homes during winter). Such well-known semi-nomadic groups are for instance the Thracian *Kalajdžii* (tinsmiths) in Bulgaria and the so-called *Lâeši* or *Pletoši* or *Kortorari* in Romania.

The fall of totalitarian regimes in 1989 did not lead to the Roma resuming their nomadic lifestyle. Currently we are witnessing a revival of nomadic activities, but it is temporary and in response to the difficulties of the transition period. The Romani migrations towards western Europe were on a much bigger scale, yet they were not the expression of a nomadic lifestyle, but a form of cross-border labour mobility. The nomadic camps and temporary settlements of Roma in western Europe are actually the brainchild of government policy in the relevant countries (e.g. Italy and France) to their local nomadic population, in whose context some Roma – many of them labour migrants from Romania and Bulgaria are inscribed. In contrast, representatives often of the same Romani groups lead a settled way of life in urban or rural environments in other countries (e.g. Spain, Germany, Britain, Austria or the Netherland). Most significantly, the main purpose of the vast majority of Romani migrants (excluding refugees from wars in the former Yugoslavia) in western Europe is to save money to build new and better homes in their home countries.

Ill. 9 Pilgrimage of Orthodox Christians nomadic Thracian *Kalajdžii* to the "St. Virgin" monastery of Bachkovo in Bulgaria on the day of the Assumption of Marry, 1998

Ill. 10 Pilgrimage of Muslim Gypsies from the town of Plovdiv to the "St. Virgin" monastery of Bachkovo in Bulgaria on the day of the Assumption of Marry, 1998

EXOTISATION OF ROMANI CULTURE

Stereotypes about the Romani culture (or its segments) as something unique and exotic with no analogies in other nations also have historical roots.

Among different nations in the Balkans and in Asia Minor there is a widespread saying that "in the world there are 77 and a half [in the Islamic version - 52 and a half] religions" ['religion' in this case is used in sense of nation], as the "half" are "Gypsies". However, in reality in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, Roma profess the same religion as their surrounding populations - e.g. *Dasikane Roma* (Orthodox Christians, who usually use the self-appellation "Serbian" or "Bulgarian Gypsies") and *Xoraxane / Xorane Roma* (or "Turkish Gypsies") who live in Bulgaria and Serbia. The fact that some parts of the Romani community profess one religion, others another, with conversions from one confession to another is not unique. Other nations in these regions also have, to a varying degree, a system of beliefs, customs and rituals with syncretic elements from the main confessions in addition to pre-monotheistic relics. The conversion to the so-called "new" evangelical churches among both Roma and the surrounding population is a phenomenon characteristic of all countries over the last two decades (yet among Roma such conversion is especially widespread).

In other cases, Roma still preserve the religion of the surrounding population after their migration to other countries. Thus, for example the *Kârâmlâtika Roma* or *Krimurja*, whose ancestors migrated from the Balkans to Crimea in the 18th century and subsequently resettled also across today's Russia and Ukraine, continue to keep (at least nominally) their Islamic faith. Similarly, some of the descendants of *Kelderara* and *Lovara* who migrated from the lands of the Austro-Hungarian into the Russian Empire in the early 20th century and who currently live in countries of the former Soviet Union consider themselves Catholic to this day.

In scientific literature studying the Roma the view about the importance of the sacral opposition clean/unclean in the life and rituals of the Roma, as well as the concept of the category 'unclean' is widespread. It is referred to as *magaripe* (adj. *magerdo*), *maxaripe* (adj. *maxarime*), *maxrimata* or *maxrimos* (adj *maxrime*), *magerimos* (adj. *magerimo*) *pekelimos* (adj. *pekelime*), etc. among *Ruska Roma, Polska Roma, Servi, Kelderari, Lovari, Kišinjovci, Vlaxi* in the countries of the former Soviet Union and in Poland, as well as among the so-called *Olax Řom* in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, among *Čergarja* from the former Yugoslavia, among the so-called nomadic *Kardaraši / Kaldaraši* (with the self-appelation *Řom Ciganjak*) in Bulgaria, among *Sepetdži* in Turkey, etc., as well as among so-called *Vlax Řom* in the U.S. and Canada. Moreover, there is a well-known track in Anglo-Saxon anthropology which considers this category as the single most important structure-concept of the whole Romani culture. For all peoples living in the Balkans and not only for Roma, however, this category and the ritual practices based on it are well known – not just as 'own' cultural traditions, but as a practice widely spread until today (e.g. the woman is considered 'unclean' until 40 days after the birth of her child). Naturally, Romani groups in the Balkans do not understand this category to be their specific ethnic marker, but outside the Balkans, they carry, keep, strengthen and enrich this norm, turning it into a specific ethnic trait.

A similar case is the celebration of *slava* (a day of a certain saint, considered a patron of given kin) among *Mačvaja* in the US, which is believed by some Romani Studies scholars to be an important and specifically Romani

custom. This day (called *slava, svetec* and other, similar denominations) is not only an important part of the traditional culture of many Balkan peoples, but can also be a crucial marker of their ethnic identity. For instance, one of the main postulates of the Serb national ideology is "whither there is *slava*, there is Serbia". Similarly, having *pomana* (a custom to commemorate the dead) among the so-called *Olax Řom* in central Europe and among so-called *Vlax Řom* in the US which some researchers believe to be a core Romani tradition, is a custom typical of all Orthodox-Christian Slavic peoples (called *pomen, pominki*, etc.) and Romanians (the term *pomana* is borrowed from Romanian).

We are presented with a similar picture in folklore, especially regarding songs and music. An example which is an excellent illustration of the main principle is the fact that each Balkan nation is proud of its version of one song, the so-called "Bridge on Arta" among Greeks, "Song on Master-Mason Manole" among Romanians or "Song about the Immured Bride" among Bulgarians, etc. This folklore song is perceived by each Balkan nation as a marker of its identity and constitutes a source of national pride. However, it exists also in numerous Romani versions, known not only in the Balkans, but also carried to other countries by migrating Roma. In fact all so-called "Gypsy music" is to a high degree an abstract concept, as there is in fact no such music but a large variety of different versions of "Gypsy music" depending on the cultural and historical regions (e.g. central European, Balkan, Russian, Spanish, etc. "Gypsy music").

These examples of influences on the Romani culture by their surrounding culture are not exceptions, but something rather common. Roma are not a hermetically isolated and self-sufficient community, they are an integral part of the societies in which they live and with whom they share their common general cultural characteristics, e.g. religion(s), bank holidays, family customs, etc. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that before the modern era and emergence of ethno-national states, the Roma have lived in the composition of the three major empires that existed in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe: the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. These predetermine to a great extent the character of the historical regions with more or less homogeneous cultural characteristics of the local population (including Roma).

An illustrative example of the impact of the historical regions on Romani culture is the case of the celebration of the holiday *Hederlezi / Džurdževdan*. This holiday, referred to by Roma as *Hederlezi / Erdelezi / Hâdârlez* (the day of Muslim saints and *Hıdır* and *Ilyaz*) in its Islamic version or *Džurdževdan / Gergjovden* (the day of St. George) in the Orthodox-Christian variant, is particularly significant for understanding the place of the Roma in the general cultural context of the Balkans. Roma, whether Christians or Muslims, as well as the other Balkan nations consider this holiday as rightfully their own, separating them from the others. The fact that others living nearby also celebrate it does not bother them - they are convinced that the celebration by the others is not the same as theirs. Formally speaking, this celebration is nowadays not the same - among the other Balkan nations, a large part of the ritual elements of the holiday are dropped and the holiday has been modernised to a greater degree than it has among the Roma. Yet several decades ago, there were almost no differences (apart from the language of the ritual songs, which admittedly is different among nations). Notwithstanding all this, there is virtually a Romani ethno-cultural version of the holiday and it, as well as the existing Bulgarian, Turkish, Serbian, etc. ethno-cultural variations, is part of the cultural tradition in the Balkans. Moreover, under certain circumstances, this holiday in its Romani variant can take on much wider social dimensions, as for instance the trans-

Ill. 11 Ritual, festive table at *Gergjovden* among *Kardaraši* in Bulgaria

Ill. 12 *Kakava* in Edirne, Turkey

formation of *Kakava* (the Romani appellation of the *Hederlez* holiday in the region of eastern Thrace) into a celebration including the whole urban population in the town of Kirklareli (the region of eastern Thrace) in Turkey.

Thus, in the end, the overall development of the Romani community over the centuries not only made them an integral part of the social structure of the respective nation-states, but it also made Romani culture an ethnic variation within the respective national cultures in the whole region of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe.

Ill. 12 *Peperuda* – ritual for rain, Bulgaria, beginning of 20th century; Archive EIM

Ill. 13 *Bibija* ritual in town of Vidin, 2011

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMANI CULTURE

When talking about the Romani ethnic culture as a variant of more general cultural traditions, one should consider another important factor. Due to a number of reasons the changes occurring in the Romani culture during the transition to modern society are flowing relatively more slowly when compared to that of the societies surrounding them. For this reason the phenomenon is often met when Roma are carriers of traditions that have been long or more recently forgotten or were preserved only as a cultural heritage in other nations.

A typical case would be the ritual for rain called *Dodola*, performed by Romani girls from as early as the 1920s, which has been repeatedly documented in the Balkans (a young girl undresses, encloses with green, rounds with other girls the homes of the neighbours, people pour water on her, the girl dances, songs are sung, gifts are collected, etc.). In fact, this tradition (also known as *Peperuda*, *Paparuga*, etc.) was actively present among Bulgarians, Serbs, Romanians and other Balkan nations in the second half of 19th century, and today can be seen at many folklore festivals. In the first half of the 20th century, however, the villagers had already considered this tradition anachronistic, but still paid the Roma to perform it in times of drought, thus indirectly helping them to preserve their tradition.

Another example is the ritual called *Lazaruvane*, which is a rite of passage in the socialisation of young girls who dance, sing and collect presents from village inhabitants. This ritual was in the past performed by Bulgarians until the first half of the 20th century, but from the beginning of the 1920s, the local Bulgarian population considered this tradition anachronistic. Today it can only be seen performed at folklore festivals. But the Romani girls continued to perform it until the first half of the twentieth century.

The case of Roma being unaware of the traditions of the other Balkan nations in their environment, proclaiming certain ethno-cultural characteristics as exclusively their own, thus distinguishing them from the others is particularly interesting. For example the Roma in Bulgaria firmly believe that the ritual of Henning the bride at Romani weddings is unique and are not aware that this custom is also performed by the Bulgarian Turks and in the past was also often carried out by the Bulgarians in some regions of the country.

Similarly, if today asked "What distinguishes you most from the *Gadže*", the Roma living in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe most often respond by saying that "our girls marry as virgins". This custom, however, was in the past also common for the Balkan and Slavic peoples, living alongside Roma (and in the Balkans until the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th century). From today's point of view, this rule is seen as a crucial ethnic marker by the Roma, distinguishing them from the other nations.

Relatively rarely do holidays, customs and rituals of Roma have no direct analogies with the traditions of the surrounding culture, but are usually a result of many complex combinations of various elements of these traditions. Such an example is the custom called "chasing away the plague" or *Bibija* from the town of Vidin in Bulgaria, which has no direct analogies in other Balkan nations.

In this ritual, masked young men visit the homes of those living in Romani *mahala* (a detached ethnic neighbourhood), dancing, tapping the householder's back with a decorated cornel called *survačka*, for health and wellbeing, and receive money in return. After the tour of the houses has ended, all living in the neighbourhood gather at the central square of *mahala*, dance ring dances and prepare a common meal outside the neighbourhood in the open. At the end the *survački* and the left-over meal are left outside for *Bibija* (i.e. the plague). Each separate element of the celebration is found among the customs of the surrounding population, but the complex combination as briefly described in brief above is characteristic only of the Roma in the town of Vidin.

Worship of the plague (the word is taboo which is why it is called 'aunt' by the Roma and other Balkan peoples) is a phenomenon well known from other peoples' cultural traditions in the Balkans. The Roma in Serbia, however, not only repeated the customs and rituals for worshipping the plague, but during the first decades of the 20th century developed it further and created a separate cult of a "Gypsy saint" (with its own iconographic image): the *Miraclemaker Aunt Bibija*, who safeguards them from diseases. This saint became so popular that not by accident one of the first Romani organisations in Serbia, established in 1935, held the name: "Society of the Belgrade Gypsies The Aunt Bibija".

This principle of preserving, building upon and transforming the traditions that originally had belonged to the surrounding population, into their "own" can be illustrated by one example from Bulgaria. In some villages in eastern Bulgaria on 2nd February, (the day of St. Evtimii) the *Petlyovden* ('day of the rooster') holiday, also called *Evtimya* or *Ihtimya* is celebrated (sometimes merely the memory of its celebration has survived). On this day Bulgarians ritually kill a cockerel and then rub its blood on the house doors and the foreheads of young boys. This festival's background is a legend from the time of Ottoman rule, when the Turks took the so-called "blood tax" from Bulgarians – they took one boy from each family to become janissary, noting the houses from which he had already taken a child with a red sign on the door. An old woman called *Evtimya* (or *Ihtimya*), however, advised her neighbours to slaughter a rooster, and to paint a red sign in its blood on the doors of their houses, so the Turks passed these houses without taking the "blood tax". Today, this legend can be heard in different places and versions among the Roma in Bulgaria, in addition to the celebration of *Ihtimaja* as explained by this legend (e.g. among the *Muzikanti* 'musicians' group in the town of Zlataritsa). In the Romani area in eastern Bulgaria, this legend and its celebration has taken on a new development - the central figure in the legend replacing the old women *Evtimya*, is a lame old Rom named *Vasil*. The celebration is moved to another holiday called *Vasilica* among Roma in western Bulgaria and Serbia and *Bango Vasili / Bangu Vasiy* (lame Vasil) among Roma in eastern Bulgaria. The sacrificial bird on this day is a goose among Roma in western Bulgaria and Serbia, but in eastern Bulgaria it is still a rooster. There even is a public auction for roasted cockerel at the centre of the celebration of this holiday in Sliven.

The *Vasilica* holiday, occurred on the basis of a complex combination of traditional beliefs, customs and rituals of the Balkan nations (especially the Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs) and is celebrated on the day of St. Basil (14th January), i.e. on New Year's Day according to the Julian or so-called "old style" calendar). The Bulgarian Orthodox Church changed from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1968 and the New Year started to be celebrated on the 1st January. Unlike Bulgarians, the Roma continue to celebrate many of their holidays (except variables holidays which are calculated based on Easter) in the "old style" (i.e. 13 days after the new official Christian holidays). Adherence to the "old style" is an expression of the aspiration to create their "own" Romani holidays different from those of the surrounding population. The celebration of *Vasilica* is referred to as

Ill. 14 *Lazaruvane* ritual in village Staro Oryahovo, 2010

Ill. 18 *Vasilica*, Gypsies holding ritual sticks, called *survački* - Sofia, Fakulteta, 60ties of 20th century

"Gypsy New Year" by the surrounding population and has gradually become one of the pillars of contemporary Romani ethno-cultural tradition in Bulgaria and Serbia.

Construction of 'own' holidays based on ones already existing in the surrounding population is on the one hand performed as shown by preserving their celebration dates according to the "old style" which is also the case with the celebration of *Ali gjun* (the day of Ali) among some Roma in the former Yugoslavia or of *Ali Baba* in Sofia on the day of St. Elijah. On the other hand, it is done by establishing a constant date of celebration in cases of holidays with an otherwise variable date. An example for this is the *Martake zarja* (i.e. the eve of March) celebration on the 28th February in Romani *mahalla* in Vidin (which is a variant of the *Shrovetide* holiday which is usually celebrated on the first Sunday before Lent).

It is not accidental that across central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, the development of Roma-specific holidays is most clearly expressed and frequent in the Balkans. In this region, the processes of social emancipation of the Roma have the most ancient roots and are as a result most advanced. One of these results is precisely the tendency to constitute an independent ethno-cultural holiday system, distinct from that of the surrounding population.

CONCLUSION

What has been argued above should by no means be considered as a bold statement that an ethnically specific Romani culture does not exist. This actually leads to a general principle well known in ethnology – the different cultural elements by themselves are not ethnically loaded but become ethnically specific only when perceived as such by the respective communities who consider them as markers distinguishing them from "other" communities. Combining all the different cultural elements carried by a nation in a common ethno-cultural system (perceived as own), transforms it into an ethno-specific characteristic only for this nation and distinguishes it from the "other" peoples. In particular among Roma, the result is the presence of many diverse subvariants of the invariant of Romani culture due to the internal heterogeneity of the community and because they live scattered among the surrounding population in different countries and in different cultural and historic regions. In all cases, however, this does not undermine the overall conclusion about the Romani culture as equal to those of the other European nations (and just as unique and special as each one of them).

Romani culture, as any other culture, is not static and rigid over time, but rather a dynamic, constantly evolving and enriching system. From this perspective it becomes clear how pointless the often occurring opposition is between "real Roma" (i.e., preserving the traditional Romani cultural elements) and "fake Roma" (i.e. adhering to the modern way of life). The Romani culture in today's globalised world is constantly changing, and in many cases it is preserved only as ethnic cultural heritage. Cultural development of the Roma cannot and should not be restricted, as it is simply impossible for any culture to remain frozen in its traditional form.

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