



PERSONAL QUALITIES:

**Dumali**

Romani *duma* 'talk'

**Guglo**

Romani *guglo* 'sweet'

...

PHYSICAL QUALITIES:

**Šuko**

Romani *šuko* 'slim'

**Kalo**

Romani *kalo* 'black'

...

ANIMALS:

**Čirikli**

Romani *čirikli* 'bird'

**Bakro**

Romani *bakro* 'sheep'

...

PLANTS:

**Dudica**

Romani *duda* 'mulberry'

**Lulud'**

Romani *lulud'* 'flower'

...

NATURE:

**Vejša**

Romani *veš* 'forest'

**Patrin**

Romani *patrin* 'leaf'

...

OBJECTS:

**Diamanta**

Romani *diamanto* 'diamond'

**Trasta**

Romani *trasta* 'bag, pocket'

...

1.6

III. 1  
Origin and meaning of  
some Romani given names

# Romani given names

compiled by Zuzana Bodnárová

The dichotomy of 'we' and 'the others' is also reflected in given names. Roma have at least two given names: The *gadžikano* name is an official name used in direction to 'the others' while the *romano* name is an un-official name used within the community which in some traditional communities may have a protective function.

## GADŽIKANO NAV

*Gadžikano nav* 'non-Romani name' is the official given name (i.e. personal/first name) of a Romani person which appears in the certificate of birth and other official documents. Since the Roma almost exclusively use the *romano nav* 'Romani name' to identify themselves and to address other community members (see the next section), the function of the *gadžikano nav* is limited to situations in which state officials are involved. The little importance attached to the official given name of a person is well illustrated by the fact that some Romani children do not know their own *gadžikano nav* or the *gadžikano nav* of their family members.

It follows from the above that the choice of the *gadžikano nav* has no strict rules. The name is chosen either by the parents or other family members. The official name may also be chosen by the godparents the day the child is baptised, or the child receives the name after his or her godparent.

The most common practice is to choose a discreet and popular name such as Maria or Joseph. In some Romani communities it is not uncommon that a great part of the community members were given the same official name, for example John.

## ROMANO NAV, AVER NAV

*O lav šaj avel tho maro the čhuri.* 'A word can be both bread and knife', as a Romani proverb says. The symbolic power of words is found also in the belief of some Roma that the names of illnesses and other unpleasant realities should not be pronounced. To name something by its proper name could mean to bring it forth. Some Slovak Roma for example refer to epilepsy by the general phrases *oda nasvalipen* 'that sickness', *nalačo nasvalipen* 'bad sickness', or simply *oja* 'that one'.

Especially personal names have a symbolic power, since these are 'words' with which the person identifies him- or herself and with which he or she is identified by his or her surroundings day by day. Therefore the Roma use two given names in parallel, the official *gadžikano nav* 'non-Romani name' and the unofficial *romano nav* 'Romani name'. While the *gadžikano nav* has the communicative function towards the outside world, the *romano nav* is the one which is accepted and used within the community. Sometimes not even the person's non-Romani friends and acquaintances are aware of the person's *gadžikano nav*.

The primarily function of the *romano nav* is to protect the person from illnesses and other misfortunate events in life. Milena Hübschmannová in her book *Šaj pes dovakeras* as an illustration to underline the importance of the Romani names' protective function mentions the case of a young Romani girl in Romania who died. The relatives were convinced that her death could have been prevented if she had had a protective *romano nav*.

It is in particular important that the *romano nav* is chosen well. The child sometimes is named right after the birth if he or she is, for example, named after an honourable ancestor. Nevertheless, in most cases the choice of the *romano nav* is made during the first years of the child's life. Until then the child is referred to as *ciknoro* 'little (boy)', *ciknori* 'little (girl)' or *čhavoro* 'little boy', *čhajori* 'little girl'.

It is very common that a person is called by more than one *romano nav* as long as the right, life-long, name is found. There are also several names which a person gets in his adulthood but the 'first', established, *romano nav* is perceived as the real one, while the further names have rather the status of nicknames. Among the Slovak Roma sometimes the husband's nickname or *romano nav* is transferred to his wife. For example, the husband is called *Gono* 'sack (man)' and the wife is named after him as *Goňana* 'sack (woman)'.

The *romano nav* is usually chosen by the mother. The father has the right to disagree in case he believes that the name is unfortunate or brings misfortune. In other communities anyone from the relatives can be a name-giver. Some Slovak Roma use in addition to the *gadžikano* and *romano nav* a third name called *aver nav* 'other name'. This tradition has mostly disappeared or survived only in the collective memory of the community. In these communities, the *romano nav* has merely the neutral function to identify a person within the community, while the *aver nav* has a protective function. The *aver nav* is usually known only to the mother. For instance if an illness has the intention to harm a child, it will search for a child after his *romano nav*, a name under which the child is known in the community. Since nobody knows his real name, his *aver nav*, the illness will never be able to find him.

#### ORIGIN OF ROMANI NAMES

The possible source on which Romani names are based is endless. There are Romani names which have the function to bring the child power, health, strength, wealth and other good qualities. These names transmit the wishes of the parents or relatives towards their offspring. The child can be named after a famous musician in order that he also becomes a musician. The child can also be named after a relative or a community member who was respected and beloved by the others and so expecting that he or she also becomes a respected member of the community. The wish for wealth is also expressed by the masculine names *Dolaris* 'dollar', *Grafos/Grofo* 'count', *Kraja* 'king', *Somnakaj* 'gold', or the feminine *Diamanta* 'diamond', *Raji* 'lady, dame' and *Rupuni* 'silver'. The Romani author Iлона Lacková reports that in her home-town Veľký Šariš in Eastern Slovakia the Roma used to name their children after the local Jews. This can be explained by the warm relation between the Roma and the Jews, but also by the fact that the Jews in Veľký Šariš were rich and the Roma wished the same for their children.

Many Romani names are given according to the physical or mental characteristics of the person. For example, the child is named after an ancestor or a famous person because he or she resembles that person either in appearance or attitude. Or, the

child is directly named after valued, honoured or desired characteristics such as *Čačo* 'fair, honest' which is based on the Romani adjective *čačo* 'true, right'. Nevertheless, not only positive characteristics are reflected in the Romani names. For instance, the names *Xaloňa* 'bad, miserable' (from Romani *xalo* 'bad') or *Citrom* 'sour, annoying' (from Romani *citromo* 'lemon') refers to negative qualities.

Further Romani names are based on physical qualities, animals, plants, nature, body parts, human beings, objects, precious stones, and so on. [Ill. 1]

A traditional non-Romani name may also become a *romano nav*. For example, the *romano nav* of a girl is Eva, while she has the official name Maria. More commonly, however, the short version of these traditional non-Romani names is used. For example, the Romani name *Laci* is the short form of the Hungarian given name *László*, or the Romani name *Jožko* is the short form of the Slovak masculine name *Jozef*. The Kalderaš Roma sometimes treat the same given name borrowed from various languages as different ones. For example, the name *Janoš* is borrowed from the Hungarian *János*, *Iono* comes from Romanian *Ion* and *Jovano* from Serbian *Јован* (*Jovan*). All three names translate as 'John'. The Muslim Roma in the Balkans use Muslim names such as the masculine *Ahmet*, *Murad*, *Mustafa* or the feminine *Aiša*, *Fatima* or *Fevza*. In some Romani groups the person's Romani name comprises a personal name and a phrase meaning 'the son/daughter of so-and-so', as for instance *Tinya le Stevanosko* 'Tinya, the son of Stevan' or *Mara o Spirosko* 'Mara, the daughter of Spiro; literally: Spiro's Mara'. The identity of the person through such naming may be linked both to the mother or father. Very popular are Romani names which come from movies or soap operas such as *Esmeralda*, *Sandokan*, *James Bond* or *Winnetou*. It is also common to get a *romano nav* after a politician such as *Gandhi*, *Clinton* or *Stalin*.

Finally, there are several names which have emerged in specific situations and so the origin of such Romani names is known only to the person him- or herself and the person's surroundings. An example could be the Romani name *Tesko* which is based on the supermarket chain called *Tesco*, or the Romani name *Garudo* which means 'hidden'.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakker, Peter / Kyuchukov, Khristo (2000) What is the Romani language? Paris: Centre de recherches tsiganes.  
 Dregni, Michael (2004) Django: The Life and Music of a Gypsy Legend. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.  
 Hübschmannová, Milena (1991) God'aver lava phure Romendar – dvojjazyční sborník romských přísloví. Praha: Apeiron.  
 Hübschmannová, Milena (1996) Šaj pes dovakeras – Můžeme se domluvit. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého.  
 Hübschmannová, Milena: Names of Roma, <http://rombase.uni-graz.at/>.  
 Phillips, Sarah Drue (1997) Romani naming as multiple strategies. JGLS Fifth series, 7(1): 27-38.  
 Sutherland, Anne (1975) Gypsies: The hidden Americans. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.  
 Tcherenkov, Lev / Laederich, Stéphane (2004) The Rroma. Basel: Schwabe.  
 Tonka, Tibor (1996) Romano berš – Romský Kalendář. Brno: Muzeum Romské Kultury.