



LINEAGE (VICA)

III. 1
Social organisation of the Kalderaša in Russia,
according to Tcherenkov and Laederich
(2004, Vol. 1, p. 325)

GROUP

Kalderaša

SUBGROUP (NACIJA)

Vungrika

Dobrodžaja

Grekurja

Moldovaja

Serbijaja

Badoni

Čajkoni

Joneštji

Mineštji, etc.

Bidoni

Angeleštji

Bališoni

Baljaroni, etc.

1.8

Social organisation and family structure

compiled by the editors

The family lies at the very heart of Romani culture and society and traditionally functioned as the most important means to maintain social cohesion. The structure of the family as well as the positions that the family members hold in the family hierarchy vary between the different Romani groups and even within the same Romani group. The traditional and strictly patriarchal division of roles has changed over time, parallel to the social changes which also affected the surrounding population. Yet, not only the positions of husband and wife have changed in many Romani families, but also the organisation and in turn the very meaning of the family institution in general. Due to the historical, political and economic changes in the last century, the social organisation of Romani groups has also changed considerably. Only some Romani communities are strictly organised along such subdivisions as 'nation', 'clan' or extended family. Although various Romani groups are similarly subdivided into social units, these units often lost their importance in the everyday life of the community.

INTRODUCTION

The Roma do not represent a homogeneous community. There are numerous different Romani groups which can be further divided into subgroups. A collective identity or a sense of belonging together that characterises comparable ethnic groups exists among the Roma only to a limited extent. Primarily, the Roma feel they belong to their extended family and to their own group (*amare roma* 'our Roma') rather than to other, foreign groups of Roma (*aver Roma* 'other Roma'). Due to different historical, social and cultural developments, which the Roma have been subject to in the various countries they reside, there is a broad spectrum of different forms of social organisation which have emerged among the Roma.

Because of the social and cultural heterogeneity, it is rather difficult to describe any social or cultural traits which would be shared by all Romani groups. This could be the Romani identity: the desire to be independent and to disassociate

oneself from the non-Romani society, or the ability to adapt to the given conditions in order to survive without losing own's identity. Therefore, we can outline only certain types of social organisations which are typical to specific Romani groups.

TYPES OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The social organisation of the Kalderaš who live all over Europe as well as in the Americas is one of the best known and is often perceived as the most traditional one. The largest social unit within their social organisation is the *nacija* or *řasa*. These terms are translated to English in various ways such as nation, tribe, clan or people. They are used to denote the subgroups within the Kalderaš Romani group, which are larger social units composed of many families who are often spread over different countries. They share customs and values and speak the same Romani dialect. For instance, the Kalderaš Romani group in Russia is subdivided into the Vun-

III. 2

Romani women
cooking outside, 1938.
Photo: Fortepan/Konok Tamás id.



III. 3

Romani woman with a child, Hungary, 1939.
Photo: Fortepan/Konok Tamás id.



grika, Dobrodžaja, Grekurja, Moldovaja and Serbijaja *naciji* (nations, see ill. 1).

The *nacija* is further divided into *vici* (singular *vica*) or lineages. The *vica* comprises all the male and female descendants of a real or mythical ancestor. It can be composed of dozens up to hundreds of members who may live in different countries but still consider themselves ‘relatives’. When compared to the *nacija*, the *vica* offers a higher potential for identification or a sense of belonging because of its manageable size and structure. The name of the *vica* usually refers to the founder or ancestor, such as the *Frinkuleshti vica* which is named after Frinkulo Michailovitch.

Marriages within the same *vica* are preferred, though marriages with closely-related *vici* are also possible. A marriage may be both patrilineal and matrilineal, though patrilineal marriages prevail. Accordingly, the couple decides their place of residence and their children are named and inherit either after the father’s or the mother’s side. Members of a *vica* are obliged to support other members of the same kinship group who are in need, to participate in funeral feasts (*pomana*) which are held for important members of the kinship group, and to accept the decisions of the Romani court (*kris*).

The smallest social unit is the *familija* (plural *familiji*), i.e. the extended family composed of three to four generations which often live in the same home or close to each other. The family traditionally functions as a supportive institution: the family members trust and protect each other; they take care of the sick and the elderly and bury the dead. If a family member faces a difficult situation – be it economic, political, social or medical – the various family members unite to provide support to them.

An older term for *familija* is *cera*. The word *cera* translates to ‘tent’ and refers to the traditional, nomadic way of life of the *Kalderaš* which involved living in tents. Today, the settled *Kalderaš* call a household of more than two generations *familija*, while a two-generation household is a *čeledo*.

The heads of the families, who are often closely related to each other, for instance as brothers, sisters or cousins, are the leaders of a *vica*.

Furthermore, there is a quite flexible social unit called *kumpania* which has an economic character. Each *kumpania* used to travel within a certain area and defend its right to make use of the economic resources there. It is composed either of the union of different *vici* or of several *familiji* coming from the same *vica*. The structure of the *kumpania* is best seen as a loose association of *vici* and/or *familiji* which may change over the time.

A similar social organisation to that of the *Kalderaš* is found among the closely-related Romani group called Lovara. In Lovara Romani, the corresponding Romani term to the *Kalderaš nacija* is *nipo* or *nemzeto*. The same term, *familija*, is used to denote the extended family, while the term *čaládo* refers to the nuclear family.

A similar social concept to the *Kalderaš vica* exists also among the Arlije, a Romani group settled in the Balkans. The Romani term used by them is *prekari*:

“*Amen sinam sare Roma vo Prilep, sare sinam jek anav jek nacija, jek običaj kharas. Živoinasas amen pojčke pala ko gava. I amen sare o Roma maškar amende na pindžarasas amen. Oti o phure, so vakerena o phure lengere dadengere dada, živoinasas pala ko gava. Katar o gava iznašle, ale peske ki dis. Amende si, te phenas, deš anava čhingarol pe Kadri. I tu, ako man rodes ma vo Prilep. Kaj bešel o Kadrija? Koga Kadrija? Zato treba te džanes mo prekari, o Kadrija katar o Kiramovci. Togas celo Prilep man džanol ma.*”
“We are all Roma in Prilep. We have all got one name, we are one nation, we have a custom. (Before) we lived in the villages. We, all Roma, did not know each other. Because, as the elders told us, our great-grandfathers lived in villages. From the villages they all escaped to town. We have got twelve names, for example Kadri. If now you are looking

III. 4

Romani children playing cards,
Hungary, 1939.

Photo: Fortepan/Konok Tamás id.



III. 5

Romani woman,
Hungary, 1940.

Photo: Fortepan/Konok Tamás id.



for me in Prilep, – „Where is Kadrija living? – Which Kadrija?” That’s why it is necessary that you know my Prekari, Kadrija of the Kiramovi’s. Then, all Prilep will know me.” (Source: Phonogrammarchiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sammlung Heinschink: Nr. 2293, Arlije / Prilep)

Similarly, the ‘clan’ system may be found among the Servika Roma in Slovakia. They use the concept of *fajta* which is, like the *vica*, composed of several vertically related families. In contrast, the *famel’ija* (family) is a horizontally extended family, including relatives from both the husband’s and wife’s side. The *fajta* is named after the surname of the common ancestor who is kept in the collective memory of the *fajta* members by telling stories about him.

The same social division is found among the Vend Roma in Hungary, though it has lost its importance considerably in recent years. The Vend Roma usually refer to these kin groups by the terms *fajta* ‘kin’ or *banda* ‘group’. Unlike in the above-mentioned Romani groups, the names of the *fajta* are usually (original or borrowed) Romani words denoting animals (such as *žukláši* from *žikel* ‘dog’), plants (such as *boboši* from *bobo* ‘bean’), objects (such as *pataváši* from *patavo* ‘foot-rag’) or places (such as *lagaló* ‘meadow’). However, it is possible that all these names are derived from the un-official Romani names of the ancestors.

“Mró dad odá kada álo, odoleske odá phennahi boboši. Mro papu meg odá prahošno žukláši sin. T’ akor uđe mró dad lija mrá da. And’ adá má amen bobošno žukláš’a sam. Mer má adá keverék hi. Taj afka hi adala, hod’ com sármazind’am.”

“When my father came, they called him boboši. And my grandfather was mixed: prahoši and žukláši. Then my father married my mother. That’s why we are mixed: boboši and žukláši. Because we are already mixed. So, this is how we have intermarried.” (K.H. 2011).

The social organisation of some Sinti in Western Europe also involves three social units. The smallest unit is the *familija* which is increased to an extended family in a patrilineal way. Two or three closely-related *familiji* form a ‘clan’ which is usually endogamous, i.e. marriages between members of the same ‘clan’ are preferred. The leaders (*phure*, singular *phuro*) of ‘clans’ are the heads of families who are generally close relatives. The largest social unit of the Sinti, which is composed of several ‘clans’ and corresponds to the Kalderaš concept of *nacija* or *řasa*, is referred to as *unsre Leute* ‘our people’ in German. Such ‘people’ are the French Manouche or the Sinti Piemontese. Together, these subgroups form the Romani group referred to as the ‘Sinti and Manousche’.

ALLIANCES THROUGH MARRIAGE

Marriage alliances are perhaps the most important components of the social organisation of the Roma, since they ensure the stability of relations between the families and the continuity of the lineage. First of all, marriage is important for the individuals concerned, because after marriage they are perceived as adults by the community, irrespective of their age. Secondly, marriages also have great importance for the Romani community, because the union between two individuals is, at least traditionally, a result of a social pact between those Romani families and/or the ‘clans’ they belong to. Thus, a marriage is much more than a union of two people. It is perceived by the Roma as a lifetime alliance between two families. Thus, the best way to maintain group cohesion is to increase the number of alliances through marriage.

ARRANGED MARRIAGES

The characteristics of marriages vary significantly from one Romani group to another, sometimes even within the same group. For example, arranged marriages are most common among the Kalderaš and Lovara. It is usually the family of the

III. 6

Romani children playing violin, Hungary, 1941. Romani children started to learn at very young age traditional professions.

Photo: Fortepan/Miklós Lajos



III. 7

Romani family
in Hungary, 1955.

Photo: Fortepan/Göeseji Múzeum



boy who searches for a suitable partner. Among the most important requirements for the future bride is virginity, a hard-working attitude and ability to support the family (*harniko*) as well as a devotion to the ritual purity rules. Traditionally, arranged marriages included a payment (*daro*) of the groom's family to the family of the bride. The price of the bride increases with the status of the bride's family as well as with the physical attractiveness and the good reputation of the bride. Arranged marriages and bride price are losing their importance in many Romani groups, while in some others they remain integral parts of their culture. The marriage is usually preceded by long negotiations between the two families which are followed by the proposal and wedding ceremony.

ELOPEMENT AND 'BRIDE THEFT'

For many Romani groups like the Finnish Kaale, the French Manouche, the English Romanichals, the Italian Sinti or the long-settled Hungarian and Slovak Roma, a traditional marriage begins with an elopement. To elope is often the only way for a young couple in some Romani groups to oppose an arranged marriage. After some days or weeks, the young couple returns home to seek their families' forgiveness and consent. Usually, the parents have no other choice than to accept the wish of their children. An elopement may also be preceded by an agreement between the two families, such as in the case of the Iberian Calé. Alongside the elopement, in which the girl 'runs away' of her own will, some Bulgarian Roma also practice a mock abduction of the future bride. This 'bride theft' does not necessarily mean that the marriage is against her consent. The actual wedding ceremony follows after the return of the couple.

In some Romani groups a pre-arranged elopement may also function as a way of avoiding the high costs of marriage, especially the bride price. In such cases, the parents either select the partner themselves or the choice of the children is respected. Both arranged marriages and elopements are followed by a pro-

posal and the wedding ceremony. The rituals associated with the proposal and the wedding are formalised and show great variability. The young couple generally opt to live with the parents of the husband, though it is not uncommon if the husband moves to the wife's family.

DIVORCE

Divorce is allowed among the vast majority of Romani groups, although it is not as frequent as it is among the non-Roma. Traditionally, a divorce was permitted only for couples without children. Indeed, one of the most common reasons for divorce among traditional Romani families was infertility. Another reason was the infidelity of the wife, while the infidelity of the husband was to a certain extent tolerated. The unfaithfulness of the wife was perceived as unjustifiable and unacceptable. If a woman was proven to be infidel, her husband was allowed to leave her. Otherwise, she was physically punished by the husband and/or her hair was cut off entirely by family members either from the husband's side or from her own. Such punishments as in the latter case were a way to express the disapproval of the wife's family as well as their intention to distance themselves from her behaviour. In this way the shame (*ladž*) would fall only on her.

POSITION AND ROLE OF THE HUSBAND AND WIFE

The position of the husband and wife as well the gender roles within the family may vary from Romani community to Romani community. In the following, we will outline the traditional position and role of the husband and wife through the example of the Servika Roma in Slovakia.

The relation between the husband and wife is usually governed by conventional gender roles and is organised in a strictly patriarchal way. The head of the family is the man (*Rom*) who is obliged to support the family. Since many traditional professions have disappeared in the last century, the men have

III. 8

Romani family
in Hungary, 1955.

Photo: Fortepan/Göeseji Múzeum



III. 9

Romani women and children,
Hungary, 1958.

Photo: Fortepan/Kotnyek Antal



sometimes failed to fulfil their social obligations in their respective families, which has resulted in the change of the traditional position and role of the husband and wife.

Traditionally, the women were responsible for the education of the children and the care for the elderly and sick members of the family. They were also meant to cook, run the household and contribute to the family income, for example by selling the products that their husbands had produced. As many Romani communities were hit hard by unemployment in the recent decades, nowadays it is also accepted when the woman is the main financial provider of the family.

Although the woman held a strong position within the family, was highly respected by the others (especially when she had several children) and was often more powerful than her husband, she was expected to subordinate herself to her husband in public, lest she cause shame for him. In some communities women even demonstrated their subordinate position by walking a few steps behind their husbands when in public:

“Me nigda na dikhl'om, kaj o dad pes lidžal la daha tel e khak. Na dikhl'om nigdy. Kana džanas, ta o dad džalas peršo, e daj duj trin kroki pal leste. Abo pes te čumidel, nigda!”

“I never saw my father walking arm-in-arm with my mother. I never saw it. When they walked together, he walked ahead and my mother stayed three steps behind him. Nor did I ever see them kissing. Never! (J.K.)

“Amen avka le dades šunahas, hjaba hoj o dad na sas lačho – na džalas te kerel bu'i, ča te bašavel džalas a furt pijelas, mato furt pijelas. Te anelas love, ta jepaš furt preprijelas a imar la da love na sas, našt'i gej'la aňi te cinel maro. Th' avka le dades šunahas.”

“We obeyed our father even though he wasn't good. He didn't work. He just went and played and drank all the time. He was always drunk. He drank up half the money he

earned and then my mother didn't have enough money, not even for bread. But we still obeyed him (more than her).”
(R.H. 1985)

A married couple without children was not considered a family, and a childless marriage would traditionally end in divorce. Thus, children were considered a gift and a sort of wealth. Traditionally, the respect towards a woman among the Servika Roma increased by the number of her children. The more children she had, the stronger was her position within the family and the community:

“Lačhi daj hin ča ajsi, kaj hin la but čhave. Te la hin duj čhave, trin, oda nič.”

“A good mother is only one who has many children. If she has only two or three, she isn't a real mother yet.”
(R.Dz. 1981)

A man who had truly failed to fulfil his social obligations within the family was sometimes subject to rather strict forms of social control by the members of the local community. The members of the Romani community expressed their contempt in various ways: they began to look at him askance (*dikhenas pre leste banges* ‘they looked at him askance’), they mocked him, or spat on him. These forms of social control were used to impel the person to change his behaviour. Otherwise, he would lose his authority and the respect of the Romani community.

This kind of social control was also used in those situations when a member of the community, irrespective of gender and age, severely broke the social norms of the community. For example, if a mother did not care for her children, meaning that she did not wash, feed or clothe them in an appropriate manner, she was considered a ‘bad mother’ by the others. Such women were subject to constant pressure from other women and this pressure was usually exercised through gossip. If they did

III. 10

Male members of a Romani family,
Hungary, 1962.

Photo: Fortepan/Magyar Rendőr



III. 11

Romani children,
Hungary, 1975.

Photo: Fortepan/Urbán Tamás



not change their behaviour according to the expectations, these mothers would even risk expulsion from the group and would have to return to their families.

Physical violence of husbands against their wives was accepted in some specific cases, such as jealousy. On the other hand, a wife might have ‘accused’ her husband to be a philanderer in public while secretly being proud of it because out of all the women he had chosen her to be his partner. Nevertheless, if a husband used physical violence against his wife without an acceptable reason, various forms of protective mechanisms were employed. One of the most important and probably the most effective mechanism involved improvising songs during social events in which the singer reproached the husband face-to-face (III. 14).

A good husband manages to support his family and – when the wife is sick or away – cares for the children and runs the household. The men are generally not expected to do or help with household chores, though that is slowly changing. Although one can still find some Romani communities in Slovakia which are organised according to the traditional way described above, gender roles among the Servika Roma in general are no longer as strictly regulated as in the past.

POSITION AND SOCIALISATION OF CHILDREN

The Servika Roma traditionally prefer the first-born child to be a son (*baro čhavo*, literally ‘big boy’), because the prestige of the family increases with the number of male descendants. This is especially important in cases of conflict between two families, because the family with the most male members is assumed to be the physically strongest and thus has an advantage over the other family.

The first-born son is expected to support the parents when they are old or in need of help. He usually helps the parents with raising his younger brothers and sisters by looking after them, directing their behaviour, protecting them and even taking on the role of the parents if needed. At the age of fifteen or six-

teen he is invited by his father to sit with him and the other men from the community at a communal table; with this symbolic act his adult life begins. From that moment on, he shares almost the same responsibility for raising his brothers and sisters as his father. As long as he lives with his parents – even if he is married with children –, he is required to turn over all of his earnings to the family, usually to his mother. The family also expects that he will decide to live with his wife in his parent’s house, at least until they have two or three children.

Although the Servika Roma traditionally wish that their first child is a son, a first-born daughter (*bari phen*, literally ‘big girl’) is also welcomed, especially by mothers. She is an asset to the family, especially regarding the care for younger siblings and the help with household chores.

“Kaj man te avel peršo čhaj, bo avla man aver (čhavoro), ta kodi peršo kole ciknes imar kolisinla.”

“I hope my first child is a girl because I will have another child, and the first one will rock the little one.”

From early on, her mother teaches her about her future roles as a wife (*romňi*), mother (*daj*) and daughter-in-law (*bori*), including all the social obligations connected to these roles in order not to bring shame on her parents.

Romani children up to the age of six to eight are given a lot of freedom by their parents. To the outside world it may appear as though Romani parents raise their children without any boundaries. They are free to roam and play, usually in rather large groups; they eat when they want to and sleep when they want to. Nevertheless, as the children grow older, they begin to learn for their future roles. Around the age of six, boys begin to take part in their father’s work in and around the house. If the father has a traditional profession, they will learn it. In the past, such professions were blacksmith or musician, for instance.

“Miro dad man sikhavlas buter veci, a’le ov na phenlas

III. 12

Romani children
at the playground, 1977.
Photo: Fortepan/Urbán Tamás



mange ňigda – kada the kada, kavka the kavka te kerav. Ov man delas furt ke peste, a'e na zoraha, maribnaha, me imar korkoro džavas. Na ča me, a'e savore čhave džanas. Te miro dad vareso kerlas, ta amen dikhahas, so kerel, oleha sikhľuvahas. Me kamavas te jel sar jov."

"My father taught me many things, but he never told me, "Do this and this, that and that." He always took me with him, but he never forced me to go. I went because I wanted to. Not only I, but all the other children went. When our father did something, we all watched what he did and that's how we learned. I wanted to be like him."

(R.Dz. 1981)

As a rule, the boys are punished by the father, while the punishment of the girls is exclusively the domain of the mother.

"K' amende avka hin: sar tut hin ternechar, t' odi daj hin barikaŋi. O dad dikhel rado la čha. O dad ňigda pre čhajorate na thovel o vast, marel ča muršoren, sar hine cikne. A e daj pal'is na marel muršores, ča la čhajora marel, sar hiŋi cikŋi."

"In our society, it's like this: If you have a boy, the mother is proud of him. On the other hand, the father likes daughters better. A father never raises his hand to a daughter; he punishes boys only when they are small. The mother, though, would never beat a boy; she would hit a daughter only when she was still small." (J.K. 1981)

It is extremely important for the whole family to educate the daughters in a way that prevents them from bringing shame to the family. Therefore, the oldest son is often entrusted with supervising his sisters. Additionally, in those Romani communities where the extended family lives close to each other (which is still the case for many Romani settlements in Slovakia), it is not only the parents who are in charge of the upbringing and education of the children, but also the relatives.

III. 13

Romani children
in Romania, 1989.
Photo: Fortepan/Urbán Tamás



"Pal o čhaja pes o dad starinel, ča kaj te na keren lubipen. Vaš oda o čhaja daran le dadestar."

"A father watches over his daughters only to the extent that they don't run after men. That's why daughters fear their father." (E.K. 1981)

Only on rare occasions would a father punish or hit his daughters. Such a punishment is a great disgrace for the daughter who, ashamed, would not let herself be seen in public for a while.

"Sar o dad imar thovel pes andre čhaj abo la marel ajci, kaj pes ladžal jekh kurko, duj kurke te džal andal o kher, ta pal'i kodi čhaj daral le dadestar calo dživpen"

"If a father intervened in the education of his daughter or if he beat her so hard that she wouldn't go out of the house for a week or two, the daughter was afraid of her father for the rest of her life." (E. and J.K. 1981)

Traditionally, the father has the last word regarding the choice of a bride or groom. When he does not give his consent, the child could either obey and marry someone else or choose to elope.

"Hjaba e daj leske phenlas: "Mi džal pal leste, mi džal!" Te o dad jekhvar kole čhas na kamelas u phend'a "Na džala! Na džal.""

"Mother would say, to no avail, "So let her marry him!" But if the father did not want that boy and said, "Don't marry him!" then she simply didn't marry him." (J.K. 1981)

POSITION AND ROLE OF THE OLD

Old people are respected because of their extensive life experience and hold the highest status. In some traditional communities, the death of the oldest person in the household results in the

III. 14

An improvised song recorded in Veľká Lomnica (Slovakia) in 1966, by means of which the singer criticizes the socially inappropriate behavior of the husband.

<i>Gejzo, Gejzo, so tu keres,</i>	Gejzo, Gejzo, what are you doing,
<i>Ra'i d'ives mato phires,</i>	you are drunk day and night.
<i>So zarodes, savoro prepijes,</i>	Whatever you earn you drink up.
<i>Aves khere, la romña mares.</i>	You come home and beat your wife.

III. 15

A Xaladytko Romani song which summarises, from the point of view of the husband, his position within the family (Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004, Vol. 2, p. 631).

<i>Čavorale, me khere bešav</i>	Friends, I sit at home
<i>Aj pro targo me butyr na džav.</i>	And I no longer go to the market,
<i>Romnori javela,</i>	My little wife comes back,
<i>But love janela,</i>	Brings a lot of money,
<i>Ne sa jek dre sjemja</i>	Nevertheless, in the family
<i>Me xulaj.</i>	I'm the boss.

re-organisation of that household into smaller units. The memories of the oldest members of a family, which are passed on to each new generation through oral storytelling, constitute the backbone of the family's lineage.

The position of an old woman is partly connected to the purity rules of her community, according to which a woman becomes ritually 'clean' only following menopause. She becomes a *phuri dej/daj* (literally 'old mother') and as such gains considerable power. She is usually obeyed by everyone except the eldest men, since the social role and position of the elderly depends merely on their age.

Roma are obliged to show respect towards old people, for example by addressing them with the respectful terms 'old woman' and 'old man', by not interrupting them while talking, and not using inappropriate words in front of them. It is also unthinkable for most Roma to send their elderly to an old people's home. As a French Gitan said:

"You Gadže give your old people away and put them into old people's homes – we would never do that, because it's them who brought us up! Old people are sacred to us."

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