



## Šel Rom, šel sokáša!

*Hundred Roma, hundred customs!*  
Lovara proverb

# Cultural variation

compiled by the editors

Roma are far from being a homogenous group regarding culture or identity. Instead, they are constantly and actively involved in the construction of their own cultural identity, be it a sub-ethnic identity or a collective Romani identity. Group identity is negotiated and reconstructed in the daily life of the community members and is shaped by the socially relevant factors that they share in a certain time and place. Romani self-ascription is further shaped by the internal visibility or invisibility strategies which determine their relation to the wider society to a large extent.

### CULTURAL IDENTITY

According to the Italian anthropologist Leonardo Piasere, Roma fall within the so-called polythetic category, meaning that they, as a group, cannot be defined based on individual cultural features but on the combination of a large variety of features. These cultural features include the languages and Romani dialects spoken by them, their way of life, cultural traditions and family organisation. The flexibility of this concept has allowed, over the years, the inclusion of a wide range of groups and subgroups with different cultural backgrounds under labels such as “Roma” or “Gypsies”, which Piasere describes as “fuzzy” and vague.

As pointed out by the Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth, the objective similarity between social groups is not as important as the socially relevant factors and traits that are selected by the members of the group to mark their belonging. Although the principle of ancestry, as a self-ascriptive mechanism that ensures the continuity of the community, is relevant among the Roma, it is not sufficient to account for the complex and dynamic processes of their identity formation. In this sense, group membership is determined not only by kin relations, but also by the factors that are socially relevant for the members. Similarly, the Romanian anthropologist Catalina Tesăr notes regarding the Romanian Cortorari: “Birth alone is not sufficient for qualifying someone as a proper Cortorari. A person is expected to uphold a moral code of conduct in order to be regarded as a complete Cortorari” (Tesăr 2015: 12).

### THE VARIOUS WAYS OF BEING ROMA

The concept of *Romanipen* (called also *Romanipe*, *Romipen*, *Romimo*) is perhaps the most useful to synthesise the complex notion of Romani identity. As argued by Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, the term – sometimes translated as “gypsyhood” – does

not refer to a certain set of social and cultural characteristics and components but to a social and cultural behaviour pattern which may have various forms in the different Romani communities. *Romanipen* thus embraces a wide range of social norms and values that are important in the life of a particular community. A similar concept based on the notions of *what is* and *what is not* Romani exists in some form perhaps among all Roma, including communities which have no specific word to label it.

This flexible concept enables the Roma, who have lived under the constant pressure of the dominant society, to preserve the symbolic boundary between inside and outside, that is between Roma and non-Roma, as well as between one’s own specific group (our Roma) and other Romani groups (other Roma). The notion of “our Roma”, however, does not necessarily denote a Romani sub-ethnic group that is defined as speaking the same language or Romani dialect and sharing a common history and way of life. It may well refer to members of an extended family or to people living in a particular Romani settlement. On the other hand, the “other Roma” differ at least in some of the above characteristics. This often results in their Romani authenticity being contested by others. Following this, there are no cultural practices that we can consider intrinsically Romani. There is only a combination of multiple cultural practices that are perceived as specific to a particular group in a certain time and place, and that are used to distinguish between the different Romani groups.

The cultural specificities of Romani groups are largely shaped by the intensive cultural exchange between them and the dominant societies. Cultural symbols, practices, customs and beliefs are systematically selected and borrowed from those of the non-Roma, and re-modelled to become *romanes* (Romani-like). As pointed out by the anthropologist Judith Okely, Romani groups do not simply passively “copy” the beliefs of the domi-

### III.1 A Lovara Rom explains the concept of *Romimo* in his biography (Stojka and Pivoň 2003: 7)

*O Romimo, kodo le manušensa-j de pa ternimo ži po phurimo. O manuš, sar bárol opre, dikhel taj si'ol maj but peske Dade-star taj peska Datar, le Románe Sokáša, o Višeletu taj maj but i Románi vorba, save apal voun, sar bárol opre kidel sa opre taj apal sar phúrol, vezetij le maškar le Rom, kadejj hod' te pasolin andej Rom. (...) Romale, po Dejl mangav tume, taj pi svunto Mária, vezetinen o Romimo, ke feri kadejj šaj phenas hod' sam Rom!*

The *Romimo* accompanies the Rom during his whole life. The man grows up, looks at and learns from his father and mother about Romani customs, clothing and, most importantly, the Romani language, which he acquires in his childhood, and he makes use of it among the Roma when he gets old, so that he is accepted in the Romani society. (...) Roma, I beg you in the name of God and the Virgin Mary, lead your lives according to *Romimo*, because only then we can say that we are Roma!

nant society. Instead, they act as “bricoleurs”, which means that they adopt some cultural elements while rejecting others. This way they create a powerful mixture of cultural elements with irregular forms. Moreover, the variety of cultural features and their mixture is largely influenced by the wider dynamics of social, political and historical changes. In particular, phenomena such as industrialisation, urbanisation, technological innovation, fluctuation and expansion of markets as well as the spread of new religions have shaped the traditional practices of different Romani communities in different ways.

#### SPECIFIC CULTURAL FEATURES

To speak about cultural specificities within the Romani society, one must start with the cultural heritage shared by all Roma. But can we find such cultural features that are present in all Romani groups? Is it the division of the world into “we”, the Roma, and “the others”, the non-Roma, or the ability to adapt to the changing environment while preserving the Romani identity, or the importance of the extended family and the mutual support among its members, or the belonging to a wider kin group, or the existence of patrilineal marriages, or the respect towards the elderly and the memory of the deceased, or the concepts of honour (*pativ*), shame

(*ladž*) and ritual purity? The vast majority of these cultural features are indeed present in all Romani groups, albeit in different forms. Nevertheless, these questions are still to be answered.

It is much easier to list at least a few cultural specificities within the wider Romani society. For instance, knowing that religion has a considerable impact on culture and vice versa, it is not surprising that the religious practices (rituals, festivals, funerary and matrimonial services, etc.) and beliefs of the Catholic Roma are similar to that of the Catholic non-Roma, or that the religious practices and beliefs of the Muslim Roma are similar to that of the Muslim non-Roma, and so on. For example, the baptism is an important ritual for the Christian Roma, as is the circumcision of sons for the Muslim Roma. In some Romani communities marriages are arranged, and bride price is paid, while in others there are marriages by elopement, or a combination of the two forms. The so-called “Romani court” (*kris*), which is an institution entrusted with solving community-internal disputes, exists only among some Romani communities while in others the blood feud or the mediation process are used for conflict resolution. There is also a great variability regarding the way of life, music, dance, cooking, clothing, oral literature and many others. Thus, when dealing with the culture of Roma, one should never overlook its complexity.

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