



2.2

# Godparenthood

compiled by Zuzana Bodnárová

Me po placo ingero tut,  
Murro lašo kirvo.  
Khote puške me kaj do tu,  
Murro lašo kirvo.  
Sa jek tu murro ašosa,  
Murro lašo kirvo.

I bring you to the square,  
You, my good godfather.  
And there I'll shoot you,  
You, my good godfather.  
Nevertheless, you'll remain  
My good godfather.

III. 1

*The importance of godfather to the godchild is depicted in a humorous manner in the above Lovara song.*

(from Tcherenkov / Laederich 2004, p. 603-4)

Godparenthood is a relation found in Romani communities of Christian faith. It is best described in terms of kinship system rather than in religious terms. The choice of godparents is determined by various factors and differs from one Romani community to another. Besides the ritual act of baptism, godparents are expected to act as sponsors of the godchild and his or her nuclear family throughout the godchild's life.

## TERMS FOR GODPARENTHOOD

The institution of *kirvipen* or *kirvimos* 'godparenthood' is widespread among the Roma of Christian faith. The Romani terms *kirvo* and *kirvi* (plural *kirve*) though often translated by the English terms 'godfather' and 'godmother', respectively, are primarily used to describe the relationship between the godparents and the godchild's parents. Accordingly, a more accurate translation would be 'the parent of my godchild' and 'the godparent of my child'. For instance Peter Stojka, a Lovara Rom from Slovakia, describes a ritual during which the father of the new-born asks another Rom to become his *kirvo*. The Rom gives his consent which is followed by a call of a respectful Rom: *Akánik šaj phenen jekhávreske Kirvo!* 'From now on you can call each other *Kirvo!*'

In some Romani communities the terms *kirvo* and *kirvi* are also used to indicate the relationship of the godchild to his godparents. Elsewhere, the same terms – or the diminutive forms *kirvoro* 'godson' and *kirvori* 'goddaughter' – are used by the godparents, too, when addressing their godchildren.

## CHOICE OF GODPARENTS

The constraints on the choice of godparents differ from one community to another. Traditionally, godparents were sought within the Romani community but outside the extended family. This way the Roma could enrich their system of kinship relations and strengthen their social position within the community.

Among the Lovara in Slovakia, godparents were recruited from the closest family, be it either the siblings of the parents or their uncles and aunts.

In some Romani communities in Romania the parents of the new-born usually select several tens of godparents in order to extend the ritual kinship system of the family. Nevertheless, the first pair of godparents is perceived as the one who has responsibilities towards the godchild's family even beyond the baptism while the duty of the others is merely to participate in the ritual actions of baptism. As first godparents either Roma or non-Roma are selected while the second and further couples of godparents are only Roma. In rural Slovakia it was typical, too, that the Roma invited non-Roma, especially rich farmers and wealthy peasants, to become godparents. A motivation for such a choice may be found in that the institution of godparenthood, as it will be described in the next section, is based on mutual solidarity.

Traditionally, in some Romani communities in Eastern Slovakia even young children as old as 7-10 years could become godparents. As long as they reached adulthood, all duties related to the godparent relationship were carried out by their parents, including the official ceremony of baptism in the church. Among the *Romungre* 'Hungarian Roma' in Romania, teenagers are sometimes also invited as godparents.

The parents of the child choose the godparents before the child is born. In several Romani communities there is a formal meeting of the parents and the future godparents where food and drink is served. Among the Lovara Roma in Slovakia the father of the child pays a visit to the Rom whom he intends to invite as godfather. These visits involve several formalities like greetings, toasts, the invitation to become godfather and the given consent of the godfather. Most of the food and drink is offered to the attendants only after the godfather has given his consent.

The institution of godparenthood has been recently re-defined in several Romani communities given the fact that the

Ando Romimo o Kirvimo, kodo nad'on fontoššoj, ke le manuša save hařären pe jejkhávres hod' lášej, kamen mařkar pe taj andej Rom t'aven inke maj láše azír xuřilen pe Kirvenge. Vi azír, hod' te rakhađ'ola kodo cigno hod' te vátij le-s kodo Kirvo ávri anda bejngesko řing.

III. 2

Among the Lovara Roma the godparents are believed to save the child from the "devil's horn" by bringing him or her to baptise.

(from Stojka / Pivoň 2003, p. 9)

In the Romani tradition the godparenthood is very important, because those Roma who are good and get along well with each other would like to have an even better relation between themselves and towards the other Roma. And that's why they choose to become godparents. Another reason is that the godparent takes out the small child from the devil's horn.

importance of extended families is diminishing on the one hand and the solidarity-based function of godparenthood has lost its ground in the modern world on the other. It follows that today the parents choose godparents from the closest family, usually their sibling while the practice to invite Non-Roma and young children to become godparents already belongs to the past.

#### FUNCTION OF GODPARENTS

The initial role of godparents is to assist in the official ceremony of baptism. At this event, the godparents bring presents (like clothes, duvet, jewellery or money) for the child. The child often receives the official given name (i.e. *gadřikano nav* 'non-Romani name') after his or her godparent.

The duties and responsibilities of godparents do not end with the baptism. Godparenthood represents a strong bond between two families which is characterized by mutual solidarity. Thus, the primary function of the godparents is to support the godchild's family in case of need and to raise their godchild if something happens to the parents. In some Romani dialects, the meaning of the term *kirvo* is 'sponsor' alongside 'godfather'.

A solidarity-based relation characterized the godparenthood between the Slovak Roma and their non-Romani *kirve*, too. The Slovak farmers and peasants provided the Romani family with food in hard times and the Romani family, in return, helped the Slovak family with work in the fields and the house upon request. The relationship, however, was not balanced as the Slovak godparents, like any other Slovak villagers, would never enter the Romani settlement in order to pay a visit to the Romani family.

Apart from the baptism, the godparents are expected to participate and give presents at least in the most significant events of the godchild's life such as the first day in school, the 15th birthday or his or her wedding. In these occasions the godparents always bring the godchild a present. In some Romani communities the godmother is responsible to buying the wedding rings to the godchild. If the godparent has passed away, at the day of the wedding the goddaughter brings flowers to the godparent's grave while the godson visits the grave with a bottle of alcohol from which he pours on the grave.

Traditionally, the institution of godparenthood has an upmost importance. Godparents are treated with respect and even in cases when they are not related to the family, they are perceived as family members. Among some Romungre in Romania, for instance, the godparents address their godchild by the terms 'my son' or 'my daughter'.

The godparents and the parents of the child address each other in a polite way from the day on the godparenthood has been established, irrespective of the age difference between the two parties. Naturally, the godchild also has to speak with his godparents in a respectful way, even though the age difference is merely 10 years between them.

To become a godparent is an honour and brings respect to the person within the Romani community. The respect of the person is directly proportional with the number of his or her godchildren: being responsible for more godchildren means to earn more respect from the community. Therefore, it rarely happens that someone would refuse an invitation to become the godparent.

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